WESTERN Adventures

FEB. '43

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A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

OT-LEAD HOMESTEAD

NOVEL BY WALKER TOMPKINS

PLUS ACTION-PACKED TALES BY
ED MOORE • NORMAN A. FOX
ELI COLTER • ED EARL REPP

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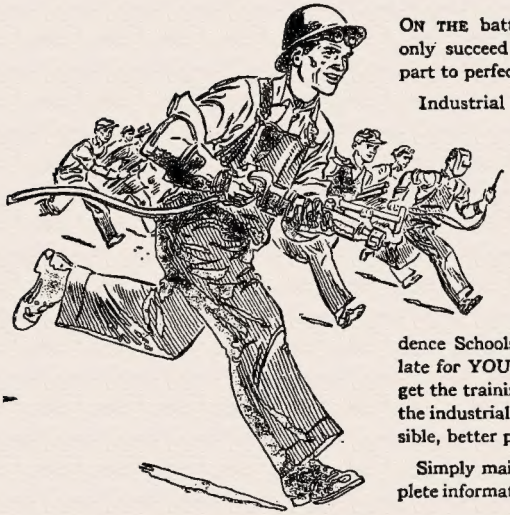

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WESTERN Adventures

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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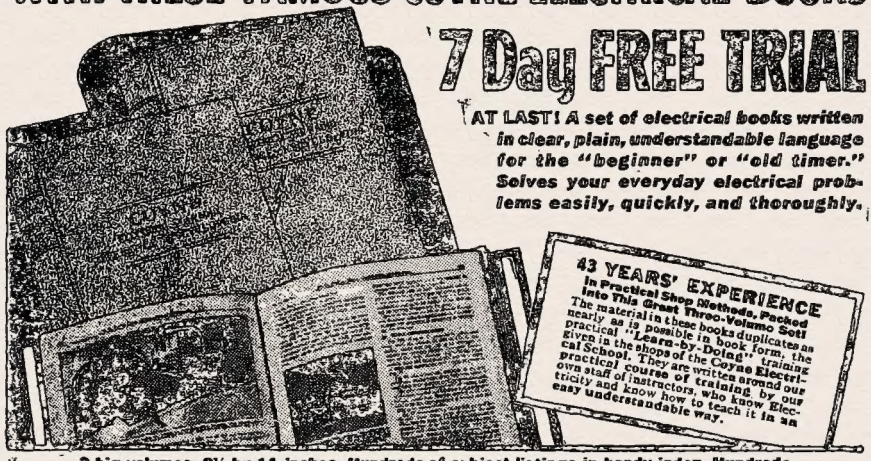
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The Home Corral

WELL, we've gone an' done it. Yep, we've gone an' rounded up another big cavvy of yarns for you folks out there to take a gander at. Personally, we think we've cut out some pretty fine stock and that there's not a scrub in the bunch. But mebbeso there'll be some that have their own opinion about that. Which is what we're edgin' up to. It's this difference of opinion that makes a democracy—and a magazine—tick. So how about climbin' up here on the opera seat with us augerin' this thing out? That's the surest way of gettin' just the sort of magazine you want.

George Richner of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, seems to like the fact that we added to our spread in the last issue. Says he:

Congratulations on the big, new Western Adventures! I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw all the stories listed on the contents page, but I must admit every yarn was up to W. A.'s usual high standards. I was just a little bit disappointed, though, that you didn't find room for at least one poem of the cattle country. Hope you'll make up for that omission in the next issue.

We're mighty glad Western Adventure's increase in size pleases you so much, George, and we sure feel down in the mouth that we still haven't been able to squeeze in a poem. But somehow the top string of stories and features we lined up just didn't leave any room to spare.

Another request for poems in W. A., and a plug for S. Omar Barker, comes from a young Tejano who's now working as a hand for the best boss in the world, old Uncle Sam. Here are his comments regarding Barker's poem that appeared in the August, 1942, issue of Western Adventures. Says Cecil Morris:

In going through a back issue of Western Adventures, I found the poem, "Cow Hoss," written by S. Omar Barker. As a Texas cowboy, I can say that Barker knows his horses.

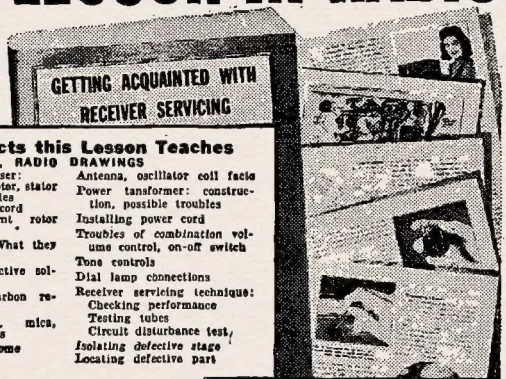
I would like to see more poems, sketches and songs in future issues of Western Adventures. These mean a lot to a Texas waddy. Even if I didn't like the fiction, I'd still buy your magazine just on the chance of finding a poem like "Cow Hoss."

Thanks, Cecil, for them kind words. We don't know about the sketches and songs but just as sure as there are tall top hands in Texas we'll have a poem for you in the next issue of W. A.—so look for it. But don't show it to the Nips when you get to Tokio. They wouldn't understand!

Guess that's all we have space for this issue, but don't forget—we've still got room on the top rail for any of you gents—or ladies—who've got something to run off at the head about.

Fire away!

FREE LESSON IN RADIO



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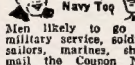

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HOT-LEAD HOMESTEAD

—that was the name Gil Hollister gave to the land that would be his if he could prove up on it, and long before the gun smoke cleared away, Gil knew it hadn't been misnamed

by

WALKER TOMPKINS

CHAPTER I

CRAWL—OR DRAW!

GIL HOLLISTER was carrying his saddle into the livery barn for the hostler to give a soaping when the trouble broke between his range boss, Thad Shane, and the big stranger who had been unhitching his pony at the tie bar.

Shane's bullish roar rumbled in echo up and down Gunsight Butte's saloon-flanked street:

"I take that kind o' talk offn no man alive, Missouri Morgan. Either you crawl—or draw!"

Hollister let his double-rigged kak drop unnoticed. Turning, the waddy saw men on the shady side of the border town street begin hunting for cover. They knew shoot-sign when they heard it. When the foreman of the big Caprock Basin cattle combine bellowed like that, it meant he was baiting some hombre into a gun brawl, and wanted the town to witness that he had given his adversary an even chance to unlimber and shoot.

Having ridden for the Caprock outfit for better than ten years, Hollister could guess the outcome of this

Hollister rolled over the brink of the ledge and hurtled down to the sod roof extending out from the dugout toolhouse.

ruckus. Shane could give greased lightning a head-start and beat it to holsters.

Hollister jerked his gaze over to Shane's intended victim. He saw a burly giant in brushpopper jumper and cuffed Levis, who topped Thad Shane's even six feet by a head.

Missouri Morgan was a stranger to Hollister. So was the anxious-faced cowgirl seated on the line-back dun behind the big hombre, holding Morgan's bridle reins throughout his conversation with Shane. A few minutes earlier Hollister had sized them up for small-tally ranchers over in the Sunburst foothills, in town to buy supplies.

"Hold on, now, Shane!" rasped Morgan, as if he failed to read the menace in the foreman's dropped shoulders, which put Shane's splayed fingers squarely over the butts of the Peacemakers jutting from his cross-draw holsters. "There ain't no call for apologies or lead-slingin', that *I* can see. You offered me a deal, an' I turned it down. The matter can end there."

The unfired cigarette slid from Hollister's hand as the waddy saw Shane's fingers coil about gunstocks. Crawl or draw! The segundo had given Morgan his choice, and Morgan was stalling for time. That would be a fatal mistake, as Gunsight Butte would see in another clock tick.

"Don't let that gun-bully bluff you, Dad!" the girl called down from horseback. "Can't you see he's trying to prod you into a draw? Take back what you called him and let's ride home."

Even from a dozen feet away, Gil Hollister could see dangerous lights kindle behind the scorn in Morgan's eyes.

"That ain't my way, Rena!" snapped the big Missourian. "I got nothin' to apologize for. I called Shane a four-flusher an' a range hog, an' I ain't withdrawin' my bets."

Hollister groaned behind locked teeth as he saw his ramrod's hands twitch slightly, saw Thad Shane's hair-trigger .45s snap from leather. Hollister's ears were braced for the deafening blast of those Colts hammering point-blank slugs into Morgan's belly—but Shane didn't get a chance to level his guns!

With a move fantastically swift for a man of such mammoth bulk, Morgan lunged forward, and locked his fists about Shane's up-darting wrists. Moving in, Morgan forced the gunman's .45s backward and down, their bullets crashing into the dirt.

Gunsmoke spiraled up between the two as the big Missourian slammed up a knee, crashing it into Shane's solar plexus with an impact that brought a gasp of pain from the ramrod.

The bluster drained from Thad Shane's purpled face as Morgan applied bone-bending pressure to his wrists. The Colts dropped from his fingers, and then the syndicate boss crumpled flat on his back.

Morgan was on top of him, three hundred pounds of fighting bone and sinew, roused now to murderous ferocity. Unlocking his grip on Shane's arms, Morgan reared to his feet and drove a spike-heeled boot into Shane's ribs, cracking bone. Then he lifted his leg again, intending to rake his spur across the fallen man's eyes. And that was Gil Hollister's cue to start moving.

WITH his leg poised over Shane's face, Morgan was off balance for an instant. And in that instant Gil Hollister's flying tackle caught the berserk giant in the midriff and bowled him back against the hitch

bar with a jarring impact.

The two men squared off just as Thad Shane, one hand hugged against a fractured rib, began flailing about in the dust with his free hand, searching for his fallen guns.

For the space of a dozen clock ticks Missouri Morgan glared at the whip-lean, rangy cowboy who had blocked his attack.

He saw the twin Colts thonged against Hollister's chap-clad thighs, noted the cowhand's muscle-slabbed shoulders and tapering middle, met the cold anger of a pair of ice-blue eyes set in a saddle-hued, sharp-chiseled face.

"You ain't stompin' a man when he's down, Morgan!" Hollister snarled. "Usually I don't horn in on another man's fight, especially when I don't know what was back of it. But you were set to rake out Shane's eyeballs with a spur, an' that's no dice!"

The Missourian's shaggy jaw dropped in amazement. His gargantuan bulk nearly doubled the weight of the syndicate puncher, rugged and compact though Hollister was.

The cowboy braced himself as he saw Morgan set his legs for a headlong rush, his big hands coiling into ham-sized bludgeons of destruction. Like a bull moose brought to bay by a wolf pack, Morgan had brushed Thad Shane from his mind as he turned to meet the threat of a new and lighter foe.

Then, from behind Gil Hollister, came the rasping snarl of the Caprock Basin range boss:

"Get out o' the line o' fire, Gil. I'm smokin' down that salty jasper —like I started out to do!"

Gil Hollister heard a cry of alarm from the girl who sat motionless on the line-back dun. He whirled to see that Thad Shane had picked himself out of the dust and was weaving up with both six-guns cocked and leveled for the kill.

The men trooping across the wheel-rutted street heard the slap of Hollister's rope-calloused palms jerking his own guns from scabbards. They saw him swing one Colt over to cover Morgan, while the other jutted in a wide V to put Shane under a cold drop.

"Holster up, boss!" clipped the waddy, backing away. "There's no call for blood-spillin' Morgan, rattle your hocks out o' town. I'll ride herd on Shane till he cools down."

The congested purple drained from Thad Shane's visage as he stared at the black muzzle of his line rider's gun. Warning flamed in Hollister's eyes, and the syndicate boss knew that the waddy, having drawn cards in this feud, had gone too far to back out now.

"Thanks, son!" rumbled Missouri Morgan, managing a grin as he took his reins from the waiting girl and swung into stirrups. "I I reckon I lost my danged fool temper, fixin' to blind Shane thataway. I wasn't lookin' for no trouble with that four-flusher in the first place."

Hollister tore his gaze off Thad Shane long enough to catch Rena Morgan's uncertain smile as the girl spurred her dun alongside the Missourian's stirrup.

A moment later, and the two were riding off between Gunsight Butte's false-fronted frames. The town seemed to release its pentup breath, as Thad Shane rammed his matched Colts back into holsters.

A bleak grin twisted Hollister's mouth as he followed suit, his eyes sardonic as they met Shane's baffled stare.

"You're firin' me," he muttered. "Well, *'sta nada*. I quit."

Shane snapped himself out of his

trance with an effort and shook his head.

"Quit, hell!" growled the combine foreman, rubbing the cracked rib where Morgan's heel had battered the wind from his lungs. "That gorilla-faced sodbuster would have tromped my brains out if you hadn't backed my play. I'm in your debt, Gil. An' Thad Shane always pays his debts. Pronto!"

Broad grins broke the tension on the faces of the gun-slung buckaroos and saloon loafers who had thronged about the livery barn. A goodly number of the arrivals were bunkhouse mates of Hollister's, for this was payday on the Caprock outfit, and Thad Shane had ridden to town with his crew to help celebrate the end of the fall beef gather.

"Everybody takes a pasear down to the Red Eagle bar!" Shane bawled, linking an arm through Hollister's. "The drinks are on me. Come on, Gil—while we hoist a few drams to the saltiest rannihan on my payroll!"

CHAPTER II

COWMAN'S EDEN

HOLLISTER fell in step with his boss with little enthusiasm. A hard-bitten young Texan, crowding thirty, Hollister had ridden for the Caprock iron going on a decade. He gambled little, drank less. More than once, he had been on the verge of drawing his time, when he seemed unable to stomach the ruthless tyranny of Thad Shane.

But a burning ambition to possess a brand of his own—to amount to something better than a saddle tramp—had kept Hollister in Caprock Basin since his late 'teens. Other Arizona ranches paid a dollar a day and found to their riders, and it took a long time to save dinero at that rate. Shane paid fifty dollars a month and syndicate riders were always in line for fat bonuses.

Men were jostling the Red Eagle's bar by the time Hollister and Shane reached the saloon porch. There the big segundo paused, eyes kindling with a new idea.

"Hell—tankin' you up with rotgut ain't no way to reward you for savin' my eyesight, Gil!" boomed the ramrod. "Come on up to Morse Levitt's office. I'm *really* goin' to pay off!"

Hollister was mumbling protests that he had done nothing to deserve a reward as Shane escorted him to a screen door opening on a flight of rickety stairs.

They ascended to the upper floor of the saloon and entered the dingy offices of Morse Levitt, the cowtown lawyer who handled the beef combine's legal affairs.

"Young Gil here just saved me from gettin' my eyes slashed by Missouri Morgan's spurs, Levitt!" announced Thad Shane as the scrawny lawyer arose from behind his cluttered desk to greet them. "I brung him here to pay him off for that favor."

Levitt waved them into rawhide-laced chairs, his hatchet face alight with interest.

"I seen the trouble from my front window, Thad. That sodbuster's lucky he's not being measured for a wooden overcoat, about now."

Hollister toyed with his Stetson brim in embarrassment. He saw the lawyer produce a box of cigars for his clients. As yet, the cowboy had no inkling of why Thad Shane had brought him to Morse Levitt's office. He did not even know who Missouri Morgan was, or what had caused the sudden flare-up between the two men.

Knowing Shane's temperament as he did, Hollister was even at a loss

to understand the ramrod's expansive mood.

"You don't owe me nothin', boss," Hollister repeated. "I'd have done as much for anybody I seen gettin' a dirty deal. Supposin' we skip it."

Shane slapped the waddy's back heartily.

"Levitt," the syndicate boss told the lawyer, "I want you to draw up a quit-claim deed to the section o' land I homesteaded up at the north end of the basin. Make the papers out to Gilbert Hollister—so he can go into the ranchin' business on his own hook."

Morse Levitt scowled, unable to savvy the sharp look which Thad Shane was bending his way.

"You mean that ground up at Geyser Wells?" the lawyer demanded incredulously. "You'd be a danged fool to relinquish your claim to that land, Thad."

Shane waved the attorney into silence.

"That's what I'm doin', an' it ain't on the spur o' the moment, neither. I got my hands full straw-bossin' the Caprock syndicate without dabblin' in no real estate. Draw up them papers, Morse, or I'll find me a shyster who will!"

A pulse began hammering in Gil Hollister's temple. Ever since he had drifted into Arizona Territory the waddy had dreamed of someday being able to file a homestead claim on the lush park of grassland which occupied a saddleback in the Sunburst Range, at the north end of Caprock Basin.

He used to ride up to Geyser Wells, once or twice a year when he was close to that end of the basin, just to feast his eyes on the mountain meadow Shane was talking about. Two years ago he had seen his cherished hopes dashed away, when Thad Shane himself had homesteaded the Geyser Wells section.

"Just a minute, Thad," Morse Levitt protested. "The man who owns Geyser Wells will own the water rights to the whole basin. Are you sure you ain't goin' off half-cocked?"

Thad Shane slammed the desk with a hamlike palm.

"Gil's been savin' his wages reg'lar an' investin' in the syndicate's preferred stock," the ramrod said. "He ought to have enough dinero salted away by now to build himself a shack and stock that mesa with shorthorn feeders. Five years from now, marketin' his beefstuff through our syndicate, Gil will be on his way to becomin' a cattle baron!"

Levitt shrugged and turned to his wall safe.

"O. K., Thad. If you know what you're doin'—it's no skin off my back."

HOLLISTER stumbled back down the stairs an hour later with his head full of dreams which, that morning, seemed as impossible of fulfillment as a trip to the moon.

But as Shane had pointed out to override his protests, Gil Hollister could accept the gift without misgivings. The busy straw-boss would not be able to prove up on the homestead anyway, and this transfer of ownership would prevent the Geyser Wells section from reverting to public domain.

With a quit-claim deed in the pocket of his Levis, duly attested and notarized for mailing to the Ocotillo County recorder, Gil Hollister shook his ex-foreman's hand for a final time, and went straightaway to the Stockman's Bank, where he kept his Caprock Basin stock certificates in a safety deposit box.

Converting most of his ten-year savings into cash, the waddy spent

the rest of the afternoon placing orders for a buck-board wagon and a team of horses, lumber to build a shack with and furniture to put in it, a thousand yards of barbed wire to fence off a holding corral for the feeders he would buy from the Caprock Basin syndicate, and a new .30-30 Winchester to replace the battered Spencer carbine he carried in his rosadero boot.

That night the Caprock waddies left for the home ranch, but Gil Hollister, no longer one of their number, remained in Gunsight Butte's hotel to await the next dawn and the beginning of a new phase in his destiny.

He was in saddle before daylight, heading northwestward along the basin rim, his destination the hazy saddleback in the Sunburst divide where his new ranch awaited his arrival.

The Lone Star, he would make his brand, in nostalgic tribute to the Texas Panhandle where he was born.

Ringing in his memory was a comment which Lawyer Morse Levitt had made to Thad Shane while the syndicate foreman was affixing his signature to the deed document:

"You're putting a lot of trust in this buckaroo, Shane. Geyser Wells is the source of Lava Crick, which waters all the range the syndicate leases, clean to the Mexican border. If Caprock aims to control its water rights, it had better make Gil Hollister a genuine stockholder with a chair on the board of directors."

Northbound across the cactus flats, Gil Hollister sat his saddle a trifle restlessly. The future was rosy beyond his wildest imagining. Not only did he possess an iron of his own—but he was in line for a directorship of the big Caprock Basin outfit!

Only yesterday morning, he would have called a man loco for even suggesting such a possibility. Such things just didn't happen to ordinary cowpokes.

The sun was an hour high when Hollister gigged his blue roan saddler, Azul, to the crest of a lava-crusted hogback and looked down on the Geyser Wells saddleback.

"A cowman's Eden," whispered the puncher, filling his lungs with the heady, sage-scented air. "I could curry the whole frontier west o' the Pecos an' not locate a better spot to build my spread. Azul, ol' hoss, take a look-see at the future Lone Star Ranch."

Southward, to his left, stretched the far-flung, hazy expanse of Caprock Basin proper, extending fifty miles to the Mexican line. Here at the basin's north end, the range sloped up gently, cut by the meandering silver thread of Lava Creek, which sprang from the fountainhead of Geyser Wells.

East and west of his new homestead were the craggy uplands of the Sunburst Mountains, still wearing patches of their winter crest of snow. In the middle distance, Geyser Wells bubbled out of its rocky nest in the center of the meadow, rimmed with dwarf cottonwoods and willow brake.

"I'll build the ranch house down by the wells," Hollister planned out loud. "And when my herd increases beyond what this section can graze, I'll be able to lease all the government range I need, north of the divide."

Hollister spurred the blue roan into a gallop, impatient to set foot on his own land. The deep-brisketed mustang seemed to sense his master's exhilaration, and lined out down the grassy meadow in a beeline for the springs.

Azul's flanks were dripping lather by the time they reached the cottonwood bosque from the south and

headed for the elevated ledge where Hollister planned to lay the foundations for his Lone Star ranch house, as soon as he could bring lumber up from town.

Dismounting, Hollister was in the act of leading his winded pony over to the wells for a drink when an odor of woodsmoke wafted to his nostrils.

Leading the roan, the Texan headed up the west fringe of the cottonwood motte, tracing the haze of smoke into the wind.

A moment later he halted, steely eyes narrowing with surprise and wonderment.

A SQUATTER'S cabin had been built on the rocky outcrop above the wells, at precisely the spot where Hollister intended erecting his future home. It was an adobe-walled shanty with a crude roof of whipsawed boards and flattened tin cans. A rusty stovepipe leaned from the ridgepole like a tophat on a tipsy reveler, and a spiral of white smoke was curling up into the chill mountain air.

"That's funny," Hollister grunted. "Shane told me he hadn't built a prove-up shack on this ground yet—"

Ground-tying his mustang, Hollister headed up a well-worn foot path toward the shanty. Midway to the house, the waddy came to a halt, staring at a little patch of spaded ground with irrigation furrows latticing it.

Gay-colored labels from packets of vegetable seed were impaled on small sticks at the end of each furrow. And beyond the freshly planted vegetable garden was a two-gang plow and a rusty mowing machine, half hidden in the shadow of a crude dugout.

"Sodbustin' machinery!" whispered the cowboy, hitching his cartridge belts instinctively. "A damned nester has squatted on my homestead!"

A sheep dog set up a vicious clamor as Gil Hollister climbed a switchback to the top of the ledge. The dog was snapping at his Coffeyville bootheels as Hollister approached the cabin.

The door swung open on bullhide hinges, and out into the glare of sunlight stepped a towering figure in linsey-woolsey shirt, foxed buckskin pants and stilt-heeled cowboots.

A double-barreled shotgun was cradled under the nester's elbow. Lifting his gaze from the buckshot weapon, Gil Hollister's jaw tightened as he recognized the six-foot-six giant—Missouri Morgan, the beefy stranger who had mixed it with Thad Shane down in Gunsight Butte the previous afternoon!

"Waal—if it ain't our cowpoke referee—the brawl-stoppin' galoot himself!" drawled the big Missourian, sliding a horny thumb over a gunhammer. "Are you just passin' through, cowboy—or did you come up here lookin' for trouble?"

If it was trouble, Morgan's ready shotgun implied that he was ready to meet it more than half-way.

CHAPTER III

WINNER TAKE ALL

UNDERSTANDING was beginning to dawn in the recesses of Gil Hollister's brain. His gaze raked the yard, noting the flowers which bloomed around the adobe shack, the flour-sack curtains fluttering in the windows, and the other marks of a woman's hand.

There were plenty of signs to indicate that the Morgans had not moved in recently. And Thad Shane must have known that.

"I'm Gil Hollister," the waddy

said. "This here land belongs to me. I'm packin' a deed to prove it."

Missouri Morgan cuffed back his flat-brimmed Stetson to reveal a bald, sweat-beaded pate. His bottle-green eyes appraised his visitor from heels to John B., and his amused puzzlement gradually gave way to grim hostility.

"So that's the lay, eh?" he sneered. "Well, Hollister, I'm a patient man. I'll give you half a minute to drag your picket pin offn my homestead. So start movin', or you'll be runnin' a foot race ag'in a swarm o' buckshot."

Hollister stood his ground, fumbling in his overalls pocket for Shane's quit-claim deed.

"Six more months," Missouri Morgan continued, "an' Uncle Sam gives me title to this spread. I got ground under cultivation on the northwest forty, an' me an' my daughter built this shack with our own hands. That gives us prove-up rights to this homestead, an' no hairy-eared bronc peeler is goin' to buffalo me with a scrap o' paper. Your half-minute is about over, cowboy."

The two men locked glances, riveted there in a cold impasse. The strain of the moment was broken then by the appearance of Rena Morgan, who stepped out of the house drying her hands on a gingham apron. With a troubled glance at Hollister, the girl paused beside her father and asked anxiously: "What's wrong, Dad?"

Missouri Morgan patted the walnut stock of his scattergun with a big palm.

"Nothin' we didn't expect, Rena. Thad Shane tried to bribe us into pullin' stakes yesterday an' I turned him down like a dirty collar. So now Shane sends up one of his gunhawks to try an' persuade us to move out."

Gil Hollister found himself staring at the girl. He wondered why he had not been more impressed by her youth and beauty the day before. Rena was young, not over twenty, and her skin held the sun-bronzed, rosy hue of vibrant health. She wore a doeskin blouse and whipcord riding skirt under the kitchen apron, and her feet were incased in mule-ear boots with Indian beadwork on them.

"You'd better leave, cowboy—please!" Rena Morgan said, turning her larkspur-blue gaze upon Hollister. "We don't persuade easily. This is our land. We worked hard for it. My . my mother's buried on this homestead, only a month ago. If we have to fight your Caprock combine to hold it—we will. That's all."

Ignoring the threat of Morgan's shotgun, Hollister strode up and thrust his quit-claim deed into the girl's hand.

"This ought to prove I'm no gunny," the waddy said bleakly. "Thad Shane has cold-decked me into fighting his battles, I can see that. It seems he didn't prove up on this mesa when he could have, and then he found out you folks were squatting here. Was that what you two were augerin' about in town yesterday?"

It was a long speech for the taciturn man from Texas, but the earnestness in his voice was not lost on the dour Missourian. His eyes, however, held their hostile gleam as he replied:

"You called the set-up correct, buskie. Now, take your scrap o' worthless paper an' vamose, before I blow you wide open with this gun."

SOMETHING in the Missouri sodbuster's arrogant demeanor kindled fighting lights in Hollister's eyes. He was remembering how this

rangy giant had flung fair play to the winds yesterday when his temper erupted, and Hollister had no more stomach for Morgan's bullying than he would have had for Shane's.

"Thad Shane had a prior claim to this section, an' he's transferred his rights to me, Morgan. I can meet the government deadline in time to hang on to this land, so I reckon it's *you* who'll be vamosin'. Squatter's rights won't nullify my deed."

Missouri Morgan stiffened, but his impending reaction was interrupted by his daughter.

"This deed is on the level, Dad," Rena Morgan said huskily. "We haven't final title yet. And Mr. Shane's homestead rights still have a few months to run."

Morgan rubbed his whiskery jaw with abashed concern.

"Can't you see, Dad?" the girl continued. "Shane knew he couldn't bluff you into leaving, so he tried to kill you in fair fight. When Mr. Hollister interrupted that, Shane decided to sick this cowboy on us—getting Mr. Hollister to do the dirty work for him!"

A swift decision came to Gil Hollister in that moment, and he reached down to unbuckle his gun belts and toss them to one side.

"We're both in the same manger, Morgan!" rasped the cowboy, rolling back his shirt sleeves. "From where I stand, it looks like we got about the same rights to this piece o' range—me by virtue o' that paper, an' you by virtue o' the work you've put toward provin' up this homestead."

Morgan and the girl stared at the puncher.

"What are you leading up to, cowboy?" Rena asked.

Hollister flexed his hands purposefully.

"Simply this. There's only one way to see who stays, an' who leaves. Have you got the guts to fight for your rights, Morgan—without benefit o' that shotgun?"

A grin of incredulity spread over Morgan's face as he handed the shotgun to his daughter.

"This banty rooster is challengin' me to a knock-down an' drag-out fight, Rena!" rumbled the big sodbuster, tossing aside his sombrero and spitting on his hands. "Hollister thinks he can whup me—lick me with his bare fists! Well, it's his funeral!"

Hollister raised a hand to halt the big Missourian, as the nester stalked closer, one mallet-hard fist cocked for action.

"I ain't gettin' into a scrap," countered the puncher, "unless I got your bounden word to pull stakes in case I win. If I lose you can tear up that deed o' mine. How about it?"

Rena Morgan set her father's shotgun against the cabin wall and rushed forward to stand between the crouching men.

"Mr. Hollister—you don't know what you're doing!" pleaded the girl. "My father is a grizzly in a fight. He outweighs you almost two to one. He could break every bone in your body with one arm tied behind him."

Hollister grinned wryly.

"Thanks for the vote o' confidence, ma'am. But it's your father I'm makin' medicine with. How about it, Morgan?"

The Missourian pushed his daughter to one side and extended a hand to seal the bargain—a hand which Hollister grasped warily, his legs outspread against a treacherous jerk which Morgan might attempt as a means of levering him off balance, and an easy prey to an uppercut.

Their handshake concluded, the two men stepped back, chins low-

ered, eyes alert like those of boxers sparring for an opening.

"Winner take all!" Morgan guffawed, rubbing his spikelike fingers up and down his buckskin-clad thighs. "I hope you ain't married, buckaroo—or your missus will be a widder in another couple o' ticks."

Rena Morgan averted her eyes as she saw her father lunge at the waddy like a springing grizzly, his lips spewing oaths.

CHAPTER IV

SLUG FEST FOR HIGH STAKES

IF Morgan's muscle-slabbed torso and thick-corded neck made him resemble a grizzly, Gil Hollister, by the same comparison, seemed possessed of a panther's stamina and speed of movement.

The sodbuster unleashed a roundhouse blow from his bootstraps that would have ended the fight—had it landed.

But the punch whipped through empty air as Gil Hollister dropped to a squat. Rebounding like a steel spring, he came up and under Morgan's guard.

Carried off balance by his blind charge, the nester was wide open for the damaging one-two that landed on jaw and nose. Then Hollister's bunched fists knifed in like flickering pistons.

Morgan's hawkbeak nose was crushed to pulp and his head was rocked back on his beefy shoulders as Hollister repeated the rapierlike blows. Then the big Missourian, dazed and bleeding, pincered his massive arms together in a frantic attempt to crush the waddy in a bear-hug.

But Hollister had anticipated the giant Missourian's probable method of fighting, and he knew his own slim chance of victory depended on outslugging Morgan, not risking a close-range grapple. Once the fight developed into a wrestling contest, Hollister knew he would be no match for the nester's mammoth bulk and overlong arms.

Hollister's shirt ripped from his back as he twisted and backstepped out of range of Morgan's raking talons. Throwing aside the tattered remnants of the garment, the cowpuncher halted his retreat to shoot a jarring uppercut to Morgan's left eye.

Like his grizzly counterpart, who became more dangerous when hurt, Morgan emitted a roar which would have put Thad Shane's best effort to shame, and rushed at Hollister with jaw down and shoulders bunched for the attack.

A swiping haymaker grazed Hollister's jaw and paralyzed the nerve center there, forcing him to give ground before the ferocity of Morgan's charge. He was ducking another wide-arm swing when his left spur tangled in a clump of bunchgrass, and he went sprawling on his back.

Hollister gasped under the impact of his foe's three hundred pounds of solid brawn as Morgan pounced down for the kill. He felt the sodbuster's big thumbs questing for his throat, sinking toward his windpipe like a pair of iron hooks.

Veteran of a hundred saloon free-for-alls, Morgan believed in shelving all rules and barring no holds. His knees pinned down the cowboy's elbows, and he was driving every ounce of his strength into closing his throttling grip on Hollister's neck.

Veins tom-tommed in the waddy's ears. Flashing lights played before his vision, darkness swirled about him. Already his air supply was shut off, and Morgan had hardly be-

gun to apply the full power of his tonglike fingers.

Desperation put added strength in Hollister's arms, he managed to tug his elbows free of the crushing pressure of the sodbuster's knees.

Then his arms were stabbing upward, one hand gripping the nape of Morgan's neck, his right hand levering under the Missourian's jaw and forcing the big man's head back.

All the wiry strength he had inherited from a father who had died in the Alamo before his birth came to Gil Hollister's aid now, as he strained his shoulders up from the ground and forced Morgan's spine to arch backward. The Missourian grunted with pain as the opposing pressure of the cowboy's hands locked on his neck and jaw, threatened to dislocate the bigger man's vertebrae.

Morgan's spinal cord stabbed with agony, and with a muffled grunt the sodbuster released his grip on the cowboy's throat and clawed at his opponent's fists.

The inrush of vitalizing air to his lungs gave Hollister the strength he needed to jackknife his legs out from under Morgan's crotch and launch both spike-heeled boots in a jarring kick to the nester's ribs.

MORGAN toppled backwards, and Hollister was up, gasping and spent as a landed fish. His senses were spinning, and he was barely able to lift his arms in defense as he saw Missouri Morgan bounce off the ground and plunge in with arms flailing.

Toe to toe the fighters exchanged punches, but Morgan's excessive weight and longer reach were telling in his favor, making the outcome of the fight but moments away.

Rena Morgan moved down the sloping front yard, following the slugging fighters as her father forced the lighter-built waddy relentlessly back toward the brink of the ledge.

His face a fist-battered ruin, Gil Hollister groaned as he found himself being crushed in Morgan's huge arms. His feet tangled with the sodbuster's and they went down, Hollister's head overhanging the ten-foot drop of the ledge rim.

"Winner take all!" screeched the Missourian, rearing to his feet with wide-spread legs straddling the cowboy. "I'm . . . spurrin' you on the hairy side . . . cowboy. I'm stompin' you . . . under the sod . . . like I would . . . a hunk o' fertilizer!"

Hollister was dimly aware of his big adversary lifting a stilt-heeled boot, stamping it down on his shoulder with the skin-crushing force of a sledgehammer. He rolled his head to one side as he saw Morgan aiming another kick at his cheek. One, and the sodbuster's heel raked a bloody furrow down his jowl.

"Dad! Dad—no," the waddy heard Rena crying out, as if from a great distance. "You've licked him, Dad—don't stomp on a man when he's down!"

Morgan whirled angrily as he felt his daughter's slim hands clawing at his ragged sleeve. Berserk with fury, intent on kicking his foe to an insensible wreck, the Missouri farmer was not to be denied his pay-off frenzy.

Hollister struggled to rise as he saw Morgan grab the girl by the shoulders and, lifting her bodily off the ground, plant Rena's feet a couple of yards away. Then the big Missourian pounced toward his fallen adversary, one foot hauled back for a rib-racking kick to Hollister's side.

There was but one thing to do, and Hollister did it.

Jerking his body around, the cow-

boy rolled over the brink of the ledge and hurtled down to the sod roof extending out from the dugout toolhouse below.

Pole rafters splintered under the weight of Hollister's plummeting form and he bounced in an arc which carried him squarely to the center of Rena's garden.

THE soft earth cushioned the shock of his fall, and Gil Hollister was dragging himself erect as he saw Missouri Morgan, poised on the ledge like a diver on a springboard, leap over the battered roof of the dugout shed to land before him.

Before the big sodbuster's legs had a chance to straighten out, Hollister was upon him with all the ferocity of a cornered lion. Jabs and uppercuts rained on Morgan's head and chest, forcing the nester to give ground for the first time since the slug fest started.

Rena Morgan raced down the switchback path as she saw the cowboy press his attack. Hollister was staking all on keeping her father giving way, allowing Morgan no time to cover up and resume the offensive.

A haymaker connected with Morgan's blunt jaw that sent the big sodbuster reeling backwards into the jungle of willow brake rimming Geyser Wells.

Arms windmilling, Missouri Morgan crashed through the hedge of whippy growth and went down, shaking his head like a stunned longhorn at the end of a snubbed lass rope.

Dead on his feet, but with his fighting Texas heart carrying him on, Gil Hollister knifed through the willow growth in time to see the big sodbuster regaining his feet.

The showdown had come, and Hollister doubted if he had the strength left to deliver the pay-off punch. Trapped in the narrow rim of sand between Geyser Wells and the willows, Morgan would be able to resort to his saloon-brawl tactics and have Hollister where he wanted him.

Staking all on a smoking right uppercut, the cowpuncher drove his fist to Morgan's twisted mouth, putting his hundred and seventy pounds of rawhide and steel-spring strength behind the blow.

Morgan saw the punch coming, but was powerless to roll his head to one side. Hollister's fist seemed to explode on the Missourian's tobacco-stained battery of teeth, and even before Morgan's legs unhinged and he flopped backward at the water's edge, Gil Hollister knew the uppercut had paid off. He had won.

Dazed and panting, Hollister circled his fallen foe, saw Morgan's eyes rolled back in their sockets, his jaw sagging open, lungs heaving in the manner of a man knocked cold.

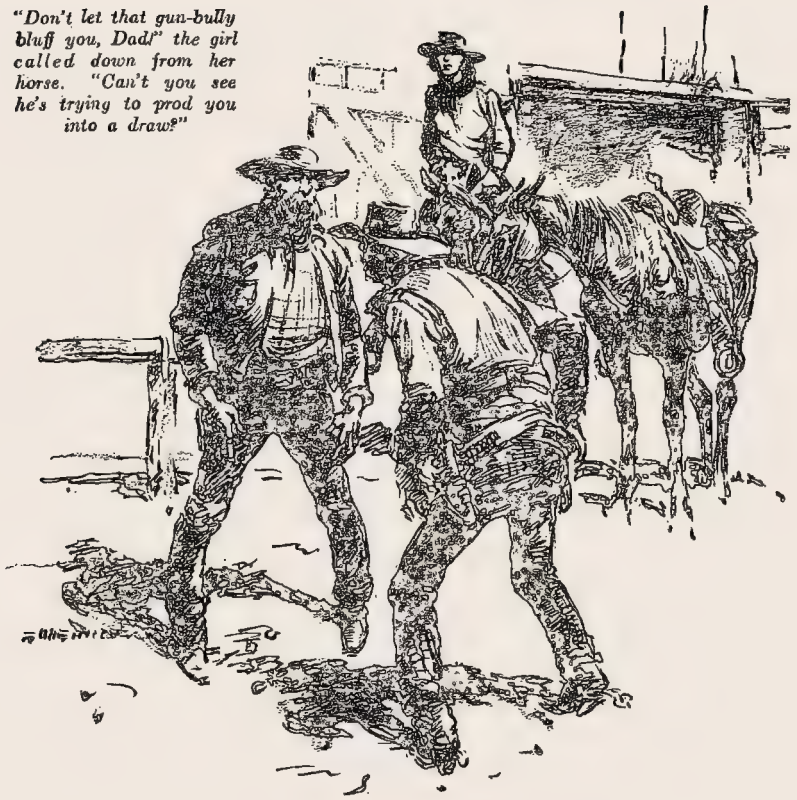
He sank to one knee beside Morgan and was picking up his battered Stetson when Rena Morgan came burrowing through the willows.

The girl halted stockstill, her eyes wide with horror as she stared down at the motionless form of her father.

"You win, cowboy!" she whispered, running to the fallen man's side. "And you fought clean. That's more than my Dad seems able to do —when his temper gets the best of him."

Gil Hollister turned away, nausea revolting him. With palsied hands he dipped his John B. into the ice-cold spring, filled the crown with water. Then he dumped the hatful of water on Missouri Morgan's head, and saw his big adversary rear groggily to a sitting position and stare about him.

"We . . . we'll start packing our belongings immediately, Mr. Hollister," the girl said, as she helped the



"Don't let that gun-bully bluff you, Dad!" the girl called down from her horse. "Can't you see he's trying to prod you into a draw?"

beaten sodbuster to his feet. "The homestead is yours. You you deserve to have it."

Spitting out a loose tooth, Missouri Morgan lurched forward and thrust out a big hand.

"You're the first man in forty years who ever licked a Pike County Morgan, son," the Missourian husked out, as they shook hands. "Your mother must 'a' been a cougar an' you must 'a' been sired by a thunderbolt. No hard feelin's?"

Gil Hollister managed to twist his battered lips into a grin.

"None at all," he chuckled. "An' say, Morgan. It'd please me considerable if you changed your mind about movin'. I'd like for you to stay here—an' work for me. I got a hunch this is a hot-lead homestead I got on my hands—an' if you an' Miss Rena want to be on hand when Thad Shane tries to move us, out, I . . . I—"

Missouri Morgan put a big arm around his daughter's shoulders and threw back his head in a throaty laugh.

"It's a deal, Hollister!" he rum-

bled. "Rena darlin', from here on out we take orders from this bronc-peeler, an' danged if I don't think we'll like it!"

CHAPTER V

MOVE-OUT ULTIMATUM

GIL HOLLISTER slept that night in the little adobe barn which Missouri Morgan had built to house his team of mules. He slept with his new .30-30 handy to his bedroll, for he had a hunch that his hard-won Lone Star homestead would soon be having a visitor in the person of Thad Shane.

Nor was he disappointed. The next morning at breakfast with Rena and her father, inside the Missourians' little shanty, Hollister's ears caught the swift beat of hoofs coming up from Caprock Basin and halting down at the springs.

"He's here," the waddy grunted, shoving back his chair and loosening a six-gun in holster. "Rena, you an' your father stay here. I reckon my ex-range boss will figger I drove you folks out o' here anyway."

Missouri Morgan jumped to the front window and stared down at the waterhole below the ledge. The big sodbuster's face was a cartoon of black and blue welts, in which respect he was but little worse off than Hollister.

"It's Shane, all right!" rasped the Missourian. "There's a vulture-necked galoot with him in a black Prince Albert coat. If you need help, son, my shotgun'll be coverin' them varmints."

Gil Hollister strode out into the brisk morning air, jerking the adhesive plaster off his bruised knuckles as he headed down the ledge path.

Thad Shane was in the act of dismounting, down by the scrub cottonwoods. His companion Hollister recognized as Morse Levitt, the scrawny cowtown lawyer from Gunsight Butte.

"Howdy!" called out the Caprock Basin ramrod, sliding his reins through his big hands as he glanced around the homestead. "How's the new rancher comin' along?"

Hollister's eyes glinted like fire behind ice as he halted, gaze raking from the arrogant foreman to the grinning lawyer mounted on a flaxen-tailed palomino.

"As well as could be expected," the Texan bit out, "seein' as how there was some appurtenances attached to this homestead that wasn't mentioned on the deed you made out, Levitt."

The cowtown shyster hooked one knee over his pommel and bit the end off a cheroot.

"That's what we come out here to talk to you about, Hollister," Levitt said unctuously. "Er—that deed ain't exactly legal, I've found out."

Hollister thrust hands under his gun belts and nodded grimly.

"I know. Shane's still got his hooks in this homestead."

Thad Shane regarded the Texan quizzically.

"I . . . I sort 'a' dived offn the deep end yesterday an' made a bargain that wasn't legal an' bindin', Gil," the syndicate boss drawled. "Seems Morse Levitt here found out I didn't have the legal right to deed this homestead over to you until I'd got papers from the gov'ment. Now—"

"Go on, Shane," prompted the cowboy, as Shane's tongue tripped up and came to a halt. "I'm a good listener."

Shane's boot toe gouged designs in the dirt. He avoided meeting the cold fires in Hollister's eyes.

"O' course, Gil," the ramrod went on, "your old job is waitin' for you

with the Caprock outfit. As soon as I prove up on this section, I'll let you run it for me. No hard feelin's over this misunderstandin'?"

Hollister made no answer, his eyes riveted to Shane's hands. He knew the gunswift lurking there, knew that Shane was not given to talking when hot lead would accomplish his purpose better.

"You ain't got a leg to stand on, legally speakin', Hollister," droned Morse Levitt in his nasal monotone. "The thing for you to do is tear up that quit-claim deed Shane give you yesterday. The county recorder wouldn't honor it anyhow."

HOLLISTER inhaled deeply, measuring his words.

"I happen to know," he said, "that you can't possibly prove up on this land before your homestead rights expire, Shane. In which case Missouri Morgan could—"

Shane laughed harshly.

"From the looks o' your face, Morgan didn't persuade easy, eh?" taunted the cowman. "Either that or you got your noggin caught in a meat grinder."

Hollister shook his head slowly.

"I fell for your bait, hook, line, sinker an' rowboat, Shane," he acknowledged bitterly. "Your idea was to get me to chase off that Missouri sodbuster—a thing you didn't have the guts to do. Well, I got one thing to tell you two tinhorns."

Shane and the lawyer exchanged uneasy glances, as they caught the rising menace in the waddy's voice.

"Close-hobble that tongue o' yours, cowboy!" warned the lawyer. "I can get a court to issue eviction papers—the sheriff can move you offn this homestead if you git ringy an' try to buck Shane!"

Hollister pointed off toward the Mexican border, toward the purple-hazed expanse of Caprock Basin.

"Rattle your hocks back where you come from, men," the cowboy said levelly. "Send a sheriff up here to put me off, if you want. But the p'int I'm drivin' at is that I'm tired o' palavarin' with you two. Savvy?"

For a long moment, Thad Shane locked stares with the puncher. Then, with a shrug, the syndicate boss turned as if to mount his waiting mustang.

Instead, as his hand brushed his holster, Shane snapped an ugly-muzzled Colt into the open and swung it to cover Hollister before the Texan's draw had steel half-way from leather.

"Don't let our little real estate deal go to your head, cowboy!" rasped the syndicate segundo. "We're givin' you time to saddle up and burn horsehair, no more. An' Caprock Basin won't be exactly healthy, in—"

Shane broke off as a familiar, rumbling voice thundered a warning from the ledge overlooking the springs:

"Grab a cloud, Shane! You an' that turkey buzzard pard o' yours are flirtin' with boothill!"

Thad Shane's face went ashen as he jerked his gaze off Gil Hollister and stared up to where the burly figure of Missouri Morgan was sharp-etched against the skyline.

The sodbuster had his shotgun butt nestled against one bruise-mottled cheek, its twin barrels swiveling between Shane and the cowtown lawyer.

Shane's Colt rattled to the ground as the syndicate boss raised his arms before the menace of the nester's buckshot gun. Gil Hollister, a cold grin flickering over his bruised lips, completed his interrupted draw and gestured with a gun barrel for the syndicate boss to mount.

"Morgan!" choked the range foreman, face livid with rage. "You an' this string-haltered cow rassler ain't partners—"

Missouri Morgan grounded the butt of his shotgun and roused startled echoes from the Sunburst crags as he shouted back:

"Hollister an' me are thicker'n flapjack batter, Shane. An' four-flushin' range bullies are our meat."

Shane scrambled aboard his mustang without attempting to recover his fallen Peacemaker. Wheeling his big syndicate saddler alongside Morse Levitt's stirrup, the range boss snarled hoarsely:

"We'll be crossin' trails ag'in, Gil Hollister. Next time, you won't have a *compañero* planted somewhere to side your play. We ain't bettin' penny-ante as long as the water rights to Caprock Basin are in the kitty."

GIL HOLLISTER thrust his Colts back into holsters after Shane and Levitt had galloped off down the gentle slope of Caprock Basin, leaving the threat of their ultimatum hanging like a tangible menace over Hollister's little hot-lead homestead.

The waddy snapped out of reverie to find Missouri Morgan and Rena standing beside him, staring down the valley toward the fast-dwindling specks marking Shane and Levitt.

"They're vamoosin'—but they'll be back," Hollister said bitterly. "I know Shane's way. He's got twenty-odd gunhawks on his payroll, an' I'll lay odds that Shane'll post a bounty for my scalp, as soon as he gets back to the bunkhouse and talks to his dry-gulch crew."

Missouri Morgan laughed in a cold, metallic way.

"Let 'em come!" boomed the sodbuster. "It'll take a heap o' bushwhack lead to clean us offn this homestead, son. My Rena girl can handle a hogleg or a carbeen as good as any two o' Shane's gunnies. Ain't that right, honey?"

Hollister looked down at the girl beside him to see her wide, troublous eyes fixed on his own.

"The odds are too much—for three of us to buck," the girl whispered. "But I don't reckon we'll be budgin'. Unless you order us off of your spread, Gil."

In that moment, Hollister knew his decision had been made. Three small-tally homesteaders against the might and guile of Thad Shane's powerful beef syndicate. They had drawn cards in a one-sided feud, and they held deuces to Shane's royal flush. But miracles could happen in range wars, the same as in poker when a man's stake was won or lost by the flip of a hole card. And Gil Hollister saw "good luck" written in the courage of a girl's warm blue eyes.

CHAPTER VI

BUSHWHACK LAW

SNOW was due to fly on the Sunburst mesa within a month, and Gil Hollister knew there was a man-killing job ahead for him and his new-found partners, if they were to satisfy the provisions of the United States Homestead Act and acquire final title to the mountain saddleback.

There was a four-room ranch house to build and furnish, to replace the temporary adobe which Missouri Morgan had thrown up. There was beef stock to buy and haze up to the divide, as the nucleus of Hollister's Lone Star iron.

During the fortnight which followed Thad Shane's visit, the two men crowded their daylight hours with feverish activity, shuttling

back and forth up Caprock Basin with lumber and building materials from the Gunsight Butte yard, stringing fence and mowing the stand of meadow hay as winter feed for the stock Hollister intended to buy.

From the first, the oddly-contrasting partners worked together like a team, their fundamental differences in outlook causing no friction between them.

Hollister, born and bred in the doctrine of free range and no fences, had a hearty contempt for farmers who had the gall to invade a cow country with their plows. But he encountered no hint of opposition from Missouri Morgan when he informed the big sodbuster of his intention to let Morgan's cultivated ground lie fallow and eventually revert to sageland.

It was apparent that Morgan, despite his fiery temper and in-born hatred for cattlemen, considered that all scores between them had been canceled by the outcome of their hand-to-hand fight. A man who had always gloried in his herculean strength, a man who had never known defeat before, Missouri Morgan bestowed a hearty, if grudging respect upon a man who had proven himself superior in physical combat.

Out of such violent beginnings had taken root many an abiding and fiercely loyal friendship on the Western frontier, and theirs was no exception.

Rena Morgan did her share of the grueling labor connected with the new homestead, preparing tasty meals for her menfolk, attending to the stock, even assisting with the carpentering as they got up the studding, sills and rafters of the new Lone Star ranch house.

But over their spirits, day and night, hung the intangible menace of Thad Shane's threat to root them out of their hard-won Eden by any tactics at the ramrod's disposal. They slept at night with guns handy, and more than once, when Morgan's two sheepdogs, Spiffy and Toby, put up a clamor, the three hastened to don clothing and unlimber their rifles against the possibility of night raid.

But always, the cause of the dogs' uneasiness was a coyote baying at the moon, or a prowling wild cat tempted down from the timbered reaches of the Sunburst uplands by the scent of horseflesh.

Not once did Gil Hollister lay eyes on his ex-range boss or any of his former syndicate saddle mates. But on his various trips to town, he noticed the changed attitudes of Gunsight Butte's citizenry, from the lumber yard clerk to the cowtown banker.

Gunsight Butte's underground telegraph had spread the news through Ocotillo County of the lone fight Gil Hollister was making against Thad Shane and the beef combine, and they had tacitly marked the young Texan as an early candidate for boothill.

Hollister battered his horns against the syndicate's stone wall for the first time when he went to the Stockman's Bank to offer his homestead as security for a cash loan, the money being intended to purchase five hundred head of feeders to stock his new outfit.

"We know your rep," the bank cashier told the waddy, "and we know you're a good risk, Hollister. But if we made this loan, it wouldn't do you any good. The only cattle for sale in this corner of Arizona Territory are controlled by the Caprock Basin Syndicate. And they—"

Gil Hollister laughed bitterly.

"I know. Thad Shane ain't doin'

business with me. Well, there are cattle over in California and up Phoenix way. Come spring, I'll get stock down here. And there's no law to force me to pool my beefstuff with the Caprock outfit's trail herds."

The banker shook his head.

"You're licked before you start, Gil," he said laconically. "Caprock Basin is cow country, but outsiders haven't got a chance if they don't belong to Shane's syndicate. I reckon you know that."

HOLLISTER left the Gunsight Butte bank feeling a despair which his jaunty grin did not reveal to acquaintances he passed on the street. The Caprock Basin Syndicate could be brought to its knees in time, by virtue of the fact that his homestead controlled Geyser Wells and the source of water for the entire basin.

But as long as Thad Shane held the reins of the big combine, Hollister knew he would be blocked at every turn. He knew what the coming winter and spring held in store: broken fences and scattered stock, mysterious prairie fires and rustler raids, perhaps even ambush attacks on any line riders he might hire.

Rena Morgan was waiting in front of the bank, with their democrat wagon loaded with foodstuffs against a snowed-in winter. Hollister climbed into the seat beside her, having left his blue roan saddler back at the homestead.

"No luck." The girl voiced a statement, not a question. "You couldn't get the cash—nor the cattle?"

Hollister shrugged, kicked off the foot brake and lashed Morgan's span of mules into mid-street.

"I didn't expect the goin' to be easy," he grinned down at the girl. "I wish you'd change your mind about stayin' up at the Lone Star this winter, Rena. I wish you'd go back to Missouri where your relatives are, where the climate's better."

Her frank blue eyes were dancing as they met his.

"You don't like my company, Gil?" Her voice was teasing, and Hollister fumed inwardly as he felt a tide of color rising from his collar.

He always felt fair grounded and hogtied for branding whenever he was around a woman.

"It . . it ain't that," he blurted. "I . I don't see how I . how we'd get along without you, Rena. Only—"

"You're expecting trouble from Thad Shane before spring, isn't that it, Gil?"

Hollister's eyes clouded gravely.

"No use tryin' to lie to you, Rena. Thad Shane's a sidewinder, an' he's coiled to strike. I just wouldn't want you in range of his fangs when he *does* strike, is all."

A heavy silence lay between them as they gigged the loaded wagon up the winding road which followed Lava Creek up the heart of Caprock Basin. It seemed out of place, here in the cactus and alkali country, to be preparing for a cold winter. But the high altitudes of the Sunburst divide promised weather as severe as that of Wyoming or Montana, despite its proximity to the Mexican border.

Spiffy and Toby, the sheep dogs, were whining strangely as they halted the wagon in front of the newly roofed and sided ranch house, in place of their customary frenzied greetings.

A twinge of foreboding struck Hollister as he noticed that none of the new windows had been installed in their frames during the day. They had left Missouri Morgan at the homestead to hang the windows and

doors while they made a trip to town for supplies, but the house was exactly as they had left it at daybreak.

Rena got no answer to her call, as Hollister started unhitching the mules. Her eyes met the cowpuncher's and Hollister dropped the tug straps and headed up the path, matching the girl's stride.

Ducking under the scaffolding timbers, they climbed the new front steps, the odor of freshly milled lumber pungent in their nostrils.

Empty echoes answered their shout. Of one accord, Rena and Hollister passed out of the unfinished building, their eyes scanning the adobe shack and the barn beyond.

It was Toby and Spiffy who led them, finally, to the little mound of earth under a flowering jacaranda tree, a hundred yards across the mesa. Rena's mother slept under the rude wooden cross there, victim of pneumonia only a few weeks before Gil Hollister had entered the Missouri settlers' lives.

It was not until they had rounded the jacaranda that they saw Missouri Morgan. The big nester was crumpled in an inert heap by his wife's grave, blood leaking from a bullet hole in the back of his head, a bouquet of wild flowers still clutched in one ham-sized fist.

Morgan's six-guns were still in holsters. A second bullet had caught him where his suspenders crossed.

"AMBUSHED!" Hollister whispered, his eyes hardening as he found Rena in his arms, her body racked with sobs. "This is Thad Shane's work, or I'm a leppie!"

A harsh laugh from a thicket of chaparral a dozen yards away caused the two to break apart.

Hollister's hands froze in the act of stabbing to gun butts, as he saw four mounted men spur out of the mesquites, westering sunrays glinting off leveled rifle barrels.

Thad Shane and Morse Levitt flanked the quartet of riders. The other two Hollister recognized as former bunkhouse mates, Fanner Grove and Pedro Sanches—paid gunmen on the syndicate payroll, both half-breed Mexican killers from Sonora.

"You'll swing for 'gulching this sodbuster, Gil!" snarled Thad Shane, swinging out of stirrups and stalking forward behind a leveled Winchester, trained straight at Rena Morgan. "We got four witnesses to prove you had an augerment with Morgan—an' plugged him with that fancy new rifle o' yours!"

Cold fingers of dismay clutched at Gil Hollister's heart. He heard Rena Morgan gasp out:

"But you can't make that double cross stick. Daddy was alive when Gil and I left for town."

Morse Levitt exhumed a dry laugh from his skinny throat.

"Our word ag'in yourn, ma'am. You'll see when Hollister's murder trial comes up. You'll see."

CHAPTER VII

HANG-ROPE SENTENCE

JUSTICE moved swiftly in Arizona Territory, but the jury trial which was staged in the county seat of San Saba, the People *vs.* Gilbert Hollister, set a new record for speed.

Escorted to Gunsight Butte under the heavy guard of Thad Shane and his henchmen, Hollister was turned over to the custody of the cowtown marshal on a Thursday night.

The following Saturday his case was aired in court, and during the noon recess, before the cow-country judge sent the jury out to ponder their verdict, the county seat knew

what the outcome would be.

The prosecuting attorney had powerful witnesses in Thad Shane and Morse Levitt. The former, by virtue of his foremanship of the big Caprock Basin cattle combine, was a man whose word carried decisive weight. And his story had the backing of Gunsight Butte's lawyer, plus the corroboration of Fanner Grove and Pedro Sanches.

"That buckaroo hasn't got no more chance of beatin' the noose than a fly has of bustin' out of a spiderweb," was the consensus of the men at the county seat's numerous barrooms and main street porch conferences. "It's an open an' shut case of a cowprod callin' a sodbuster's bluff."

Thad Shane's version of the murder of Missouri Morgan was damning in its very simplicity. According to the syndicate foreman, he had ridden up to Hollister's homestead to offer a herd of feeders for sale—a business transaction which was logical in the ears of the Caprock Basin cowfolk, who knew of Hollister's desires to stock his new spread.

With Shane had ridden Morse Levitt, to draw up the necessary bill of sale and mortgage terms. En route to the homestead, they had been joined by the two half-breeds, Sanches and Grove, who had been hazing mavericks out of the brakes at the extreme boundaries of the syndicate rangeland.

Arriving at the Geyser Wells homestead, they had overheard a violent argument between Missouri Morgan and Gil Hollister. The sodbuster had stalked out to his wife's grave—and had been dropped by a pair of rifle slugs fired from the new ranch house by Gil Hollister.

That was the sum and substance of the prosecution's case—and they had Hollister's newly-purchased Winchester, loaded with cuprous-steel jacketed cartridges which had but recently come on the market, to support their story. Those cartridges matched the copper-jacketed slugs which the Ocotillo County coroner had dug out of Missouri Morgan's skull and heart.

During his brief appearance on the witness stand in his own defense, Hollister had testified to his all-day absence from the homestead, and the fact that he had loaned Missouri Morgan his new rifle while he went to Gunsight Butte to purchase a wagonload of supplies and attend to sundry business affairs.

Rena Morgan, despite the objections of the prosecuting attorney, was permitted to mount the witness stand.

"If Mr. Hollister was guilty of murdering my father . my own father . . would I tell you he was innocent?" pleaded the girl. "This is a frame-up. Daddy was already dead when we reached the homestead, and I can testify on oath that Gil was not out of my sight all day long—except when we were shopping in Gunsight Butte."

A buzz of excitement swept the courtroom when the prosecutor got to cross-examine the witness.

"I have but one question to ask you, Miss Morgan," the county attorney said affably. "Are you in love with the defendant, Gilbert Hollister?"

TIME seemed to stand still in the hush which awaited Rena Morgan's answer. Her eyes swung toward the defense table, where Gil Hollister sat, handcuffs girdling his wrists, between the sheriff and a gun-slung deputy.

"Remember," warned the prosecutor, "you are on oath."

Rena Morgan drew herself erect.

"Yes. Her whisper was barely audible to Gil Hollister, but it set a pulse to hammering on his temple. "Yes . I love him."

The prosecuting attorney shot a triumphant glance at the judge, then whirled to confront the puzzled jury.

"I admonish all you jurymen to totally disregard this witness' testimony!" thundered the lawyer exultantly. "A girl in love with a handsome young cowboy—so in love that she forgets her filial obligation to her own father! I ask you, gent—"

"I object!" cut in the defense lawyer.

"Objection overruled!" grumbled the judge. "Continue."

The prosecuting attorney flashed a taunting glance at Gil Hollister. Turning again to the jury, he continued:

"I ask you, gentlemen of the jury —would [redacted] beautiful and romantic young girl stoop to perjury, if she thought by so doing she could save her lover from the gallows? The prosecution rests."

Gil Hollister was but vaguely aware of the judge's summation to the jury, or of seeing the impaneled cattlemen file out to vote on his verdict. Out of the confusion in his brain loomed but one realization: Rena Morgan had confessed her love for him—for a man who had not so much as caressed her hand.

The jury was back in five minutes. And Rena Morgan, tears suddenly blinding her eyes, arose from her seat and fled from the courtroom as she read the outcome of Hollister's trial in the bleak, inflexible expression each juryman wore.

Gil Hollister felt strangely alone, as the sheriff and deputy conducted him before the bar of justice to receive sentence. The judge's voice droned through the courtroom:

". . . therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the territorial legislature of Arizona, I hereby sentence you, Gilbert Hollister, to be hanged by the neck until dead, in retribution for the murder of one Missouri Morgan, for which you have been found guilty by a jury of your peers. The hour of execution shall be tomorrow, at high noon—"

Pandemonium swept the crowded courtroom as Sheriff Ben Langley scrawled his signature on a remand-to-custody paper handed him by the bailiff, and then hustled the convicted prisoner out through the judge's chambers.

A covered passage led from the courthouse to the brick jail, and as Langley escorted his handcuffed prisoner down the dim-lighted corridor, the door entering the empty *juzgado* opened and a defiant figure blocked their path, holding a cocked six-shooter at hip level.

"Rena Morgan!" gasped the lawman, his hand freezing in the act of drawing his own gun. "You you can't—"

"I've got to work fast, sheriff!" clipped the girl, stepping forward to jerk Langley's Colt .45 from leather and thrust it into the waistband of Hollister's overalls. "Unlock Gil's bracelets."

CHAPTER VIII

FATE'S CROSSROADS

THE crowd which was moving slowly out of the front vestibule of the courthouse did not see the man and girl who slipped out of the rear door of the San Saba jail and, cutting across the deserted plaza of the cowtown, reach the horses which Rena Morgan had had waiting in a thicket of dwarf jacaranda trees since daybreak. One was Rena's line-back dun. The other was Azul, the waddy's blue roan.

Behind them, in the locked walkway between courthouse and calaboose, they had left Sheriff Ben Langley stretched on tip-toes, his handcuffed wrists suspended from a ceiling brace, his mouth securely gagged with his own bandanna. It might be a matter of minutes or possibly hours before the lawman's plight was discovered and the alarm given.

"You've got to head for the border, Gil!" breathed the girl, as they swung into stirrups and raced out of San Saba before the side street could fill with people scattering from the courthouse. "You were almost railroaded to the gallows. You mustn't take any chances of trying to clear your name."

A strained silence lay between them as they galloped westward toward the sheltering Sunburst foothills. Dead ahead lay the Lone Star spread, and as Azul flung back the miles, Gil Hollister's head was busy with plans of his own. Plans which did not call for flight to the nearby safety of the Sonora malpais.

"I'm in your debt, Rena!" said the waddy, when they drew rein on the crest of a hogback to rest their horses. "I ought to obey your wishes, I reckon. But I ain't. Ever since Shane an' Levitt hung your Dad's killin' on me, I been honin' to go back to the ranch an' look over the ground. Missouri's killers had to leave *some* sign behind."

A fierce pride kindled in Rena Morgan's eyes as they set out for their little hot-lead homestead at Geyser Wells. They detected no sign of pursuit as they topped the last rise overlooking the Sunburst mesa, and slanted down toward the Lone Star ranch house.

Dismounting alongside the springs, the couple made their way on foot up the ledge path, past Missouri's little adobe and on over to the unfinished ranch house from which had come the ambush shot that had dropped the sodbuster alongside his wife's grave, a hundred yards away.

"Here's where the sheriff testified that he found my new rifle an' the ejected cartridge that killed your dad," Hollister muttered, pointing to a vacant window alongside the living-room fireplace. "It lines up O. K. with your mother's grave."

Rena swallowed hard, her face ivory-pale.

"Yes," she whispered. "And Shane testified emphatically that he and Levitt and their sidekicks didn't get off their horses once. They sent Ben Langley back up here to assemble their evidence."

Hollister grinned bleakly.

"That lie is goin' to hang Thad Shane," rasped the cowboy, "if I can locate any o' their footprints—or sign where they rode their hosses up to the new house here."

Separating, the waddy and the girl started combing the ranch-house yard, searching for trail sign between the house and the mesquite bosque where Thad Shane and his owlhoot companions had been awaiting Gil's discovery of Missouri Morgan's slaying.

But the perpetual winds which scoured the saddleback, sweeping off the mountains down into Caprock Basin, had wiped out even the tracks left by Sheriff Ben Langley on his subsequent visit to the murder scene.

Gil Hollister was making a minute study of the sawdust-littered floor of the room where the sheriff had found his new .30-30 leaning against the rock fireplace, when a terrified cry from Rena Morgan reached his ears.

"Gil! A posse's coming up fast!" screamed the girl, running up to the front steps of the new house. "Ben

Langley's trailed us here. They'll shoot you on sight."

Hollister's metallic eyes slitted as he followed the hurtling advance of a body of horsemen pouring over the eastern skyline from the direction of San Saba. He recognized three of the riders who were pounding down the slope—Sheriff Langley's beefy figure, flanked on either stirrup by Thad Shane and the black-coated, vulture-like lawyer, Morse Levitt.

"You've still got time, Gil!" pleaded the girl, gripping the waddy's shoulders. "They haven't seen you—or our horses down by the springs. You could follow Lava Creek all the way to Mexico. And I'd I'd come to you, wherever you were—if you wanted me, Gil."

For a tense moment, Gil Hollister stood looking down into the girl's eyes. Lava Creek beckoned like a highway to sanctuary in Mexico—with the loveliest girl he had ever known waiting to share his on-the-dodge existence.

"No, Rena!" whispered the waddy. "I'm gamblin' for high stakes, with a bluff for my hole-card. A winner-take-all bet, the kind your dad an' me made. Let the sheriff come."

CHAPTER IX

HOMESTEADER'S DESTINY

RENA MORGAN clung to a porch post for support as she saw Gil Hollister stride down the steps, hands lifted to the level of his Stetson brim as the San Saba posse reined their lathered ponies to a halt.

A dozen guns were trained on the Texan's midriff, and there was fury in Ben Langley's rheumy eyes.

"You were loco not to have kept on rollin' for parts unknown, Hollister!" snarled the San Saba lawman. "You're still swinging tomorrow."

Hollister withdrew a step before the sheriff's advance.

"Just a second, sheriff!" rasped the escaped prisoner. "Before you take me back to your *juzgado*, I want you to take a good long look at Morse Levitt's boots."

Langley scowled, his manacles poised in the act of snapping them on Hollister's wrists. All eyes turned to where the Gunsight Butte shyster sat his saddle, his flat-heeled, hobnailed shoes wedged into the tapaderoed oxbrow stirrups.

"You remember durin' my trial, only this mornin', Levitt claimed he didn't once get offn his horse, when he seen me bushwhack Missouri Morgan," Hollister went on. "Is that right, Levitt?"

The lawyer had turned the color of wet ashes. His eyes darted frantically to scan Thad Shane, on the opposite side of the sheriff's mustang.

"It sure is!" choked the lawyer. "None of us got offn our horses—except Thad Shane. He dismounted long enough to tie Hollister up."

The sheriff turned back to surprise a wide grin on Hollister's lips. The cowboy motioned toward the house.

"The mornin' of Missouri's murder he'd been paintin' the floor of our new hallway leadin' to the livin' room, sheriff," Gil Hollister continued. "Would you take time out to look at the hobnailed boot tracks which made a mess o' that paint job? The tracks lead over to the window where the dry-gulcher squatted when he drew a bead on Missouri Morgan, over at his wife's grave."

Consternation wiped off the leer on Morse Levitt's face as he found himself the target of all eyes. The mounting suspicion he interpreted in Sheriff Langley's narrowing gaze brought panic welling into Levitt's heart.

With a palsied hand the cowtown attorney pointed at Thad Shane.

"Shane done it!" screeched Levitt. "I ain't stretchin' hemp for somethin' Shane—"

Hollister was the only man present who was not staring at the babbling lawyer at that instant. He was watching Thad Shane—and he saw the syndicate foreman's big hands whip twin Colts from leather, even as he spurred his horse away from Langley's mustang.

Flame spat from Shane's guns, and Levitt rocked in saddle under the impact of twin slugs converging on his stomach.

"Drop your smokepoles, all of you!" snarled Thad Shane, swinging his fuming .45s over the dismayed posse riders. "I'll kill the first man who points a gun my way."

RENA MORGAN was the only person in a position to see the sheriff's six-gun protruding from a hip pocket of Gil Hollister's Levis. The girl saw the Texan's right hand plummet around behind him and whip the long-barreled revolver about to cover Thad Shane.

"You've give yourself away by pluggin' Levitt, Thad!" grated the homesteader. "You got your choice of trying to smoke me down or goin' back to San Saba to climb the gallows in my place."

Shane started triggering at the crouched waddy. But his wildly aimed slugs slammed the dirt at Hollister's feet, even as the cowpuncher tripped gunhammer.

Knocked out of stirrups by the bullet which slammed his left temple, Thad Shane was dead on the dirt before Sheriff Langley and his stupefied posse knew what had happened. The thud of Morse Levitt's body sliding out of stirrups broke the spell, and the posse riders scrambled out of saddle to catch the lawyer's dying words—words which gained a measure of revenge against the slain owlhooter who had started him down the road to boothill:

"Shane . . . bushwhacked Missouri Morgan . . from that mesquite patch out by Mrs. Morgan's . grave. Pedro Sanches an' Fanner Grove will back me up . . . if you can dab your loop . on them two line riders before . . they get a chance to . . . clear out."

Gil Hollister was leading Rena Morgan into the doorway of the new ranch house when Morse Levitt gasped his last breath. The pair were sitting on a saw-horse in front of the fireplace when Sheriff Ben Langley slogged in from the living room hallway.

"There ain't a drop o' paint in this hull house, Gil!" protested the San Saba lawman. "Let alone Morse Levitt's hobnailed tracks."

Gil Hollister looked up long enough to wink at Ben Langley.

"That was a bald-face bluff, sheriff," he confessed. "But Morse Levitt was too mixed up to be positive. A little poker-game trickery's fair in love or war, ain't it?"

Leaving the grizzled sheriff to scratch his head and think the thing out, Gil Hollister turned to the girl.

"You meant that—what you said in court this mornin'?" he asked. "About lovin' me, I mean?"

The girl nodded.

"Didn't I say I'd go anywhere—to be with you?" she reminded him.

Hollister laughed and got to his feet.

"The San Saba sky-pilot is in that posse outside," he said. "Before he leaves we'd better get him to hitch us in double harness—before we move into our new house, Rena."

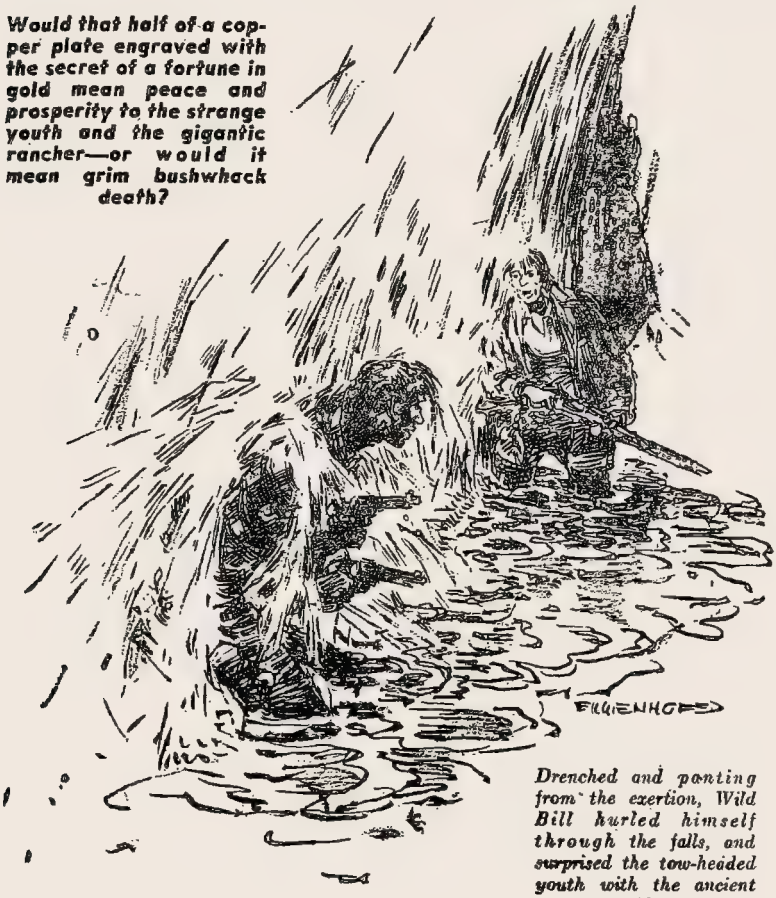
THE END

HURRICANE HELLION

by ED EARL REPP

WRAITHS of vaporous spray from the tumbling falls whipped about the perspiring face of Wild Bill Wiggins as he drew rein in the bosque of Comanche Creek and let his deep-chested claybank horse dip a dry muzzle into the icy water. Noisily the big man drew the crisp air into powerful lungs. It had been a hot ride to this mountain section of his

Would that half of a copper plate engraved with the secret of a fortune in gold mean peace and prosperity to the strange youth and the gigantic rancher—or would it mean grim bushwhack death?



Drenched and panting from the exertion, Wild Bill hurled himself through the falls, and surprised the tow-headed youth with the ancient rifle.

ranch and now in the coolness of the falls he momentarily forgot the reason for his mission up here.

He flexed his muscular arms and back as he sat his saddle and let the spray play over him. It felt good and he was half-minded to take a quick plunge in the deep pool beneath the falls.

Then the reason for his errand was suddenly brought back to him with the flat smashing of a rifle. Gun sound sheared through the steady roar of the falling water and sent the echoes rolling back and forth over the bosque.

With a quick curse at his carelessness in forgetting even for a moment that death lurked for him even on his own spread, he spilled from his horse, every muscle beneath his plaid shirt and bull-hide chaps tightening into sinewy armor.

Acclaimed one of the biggest and quickest-tempered men in this section of Hell's Corners, Wild Bill Wiggins could conjure a startling amount of speed and agility from his mighty frame. And he wasted no time now. Even before the echoes of the shot were drowned by the thunder of the falls, he had hurled his two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of fighting sinew to the protection of a thicket a dozen yards from the bosque. His speed of action, the explosive energy that slumbered in every inch of him, was the reason why the Americanos in Hell's Corners called him Wild Bill and the Mexicans referred to him as El Chubasco, the Hurricane. Among both breeds, the speed of his gun draw was legendary, the battering power of his fists something to awe.

Now, as he grimly hugged the brush, exploring the slants for a sign of his would-be assassin, he silently and bitterly condemned himself for exposing his huge frame in the open like that. A hundred feet to the left of where Little Big Falls plunged onto the rocks, his pale eyes sought out a puff of gun smoke drifting from a cleft in two mossy boulders.

His long-stacked .45 came up. "Roll yourself a slug out of this, bushupper!" he bellowed, and then triggered. The slug whined throatily off one side of the rocky cleft, winging in between the two boulders. He caught a quick glimpse of a swart, cadaverous face with a long, predatory nose and a cruel mouth, and abruptly he was asking himself if this could be the gun-handy cutbank killer he had primed his guns for two days ago.

Wild Bill had done a lot of wondering when the creek had tumbled a dead border hopper onto the sand spit in front of his cabin a week before. At first he had been shocked and puzzled. But beyond snaking the sodden form out of the water and packing it into town, he had allowed matters to follow a natural course. He hadn't wanted to mix into any ruckus that didn't directly concern him.

But when it did, he had acted—fast. The stream later had disgorged something that sent his blood to high pitch—the hides and innards of two of his best Box W breeder cattle. Putting two and two together he decided that something was plenty wrong up there in the jagged mountains that were a barrier between his one-man spread and the San Pedro Valley. He had lined out immediately to investigate and found nothing, but twice he had been shot at by a gun ghost before this third try on his life.

This time he was determined to get at the bottom of the mystery. Without warning, another slug smashed into the dirt close to him, sending a small geyser of dust into

his face. Seconds later he heard a shot from another point. He wasn't sure if the same man from behind the boulders had triggered, but he did know that, whoever it was, the killer was set on gunning him down.

Crouching behind his covert, he knew that if they drew one good bead on him the creek would disgorge another body—his own. The way it looked now, they had him in a cross fire. Behind the flimsy protection of the brush, Wild Bill realized, he couldn't last long.

Sweat stood out in beads on his broad forehead. A startled grunt issued from his flat lips when a slug snicked through the brush and burned across his hunched back. He leaped up automatically. Harsh bellows of laughter rolled down the slants to him. His temper let go with a savage oath, and he was tossing caution to the winds.

He left his covert so swiftly that the rifles of the hidden bushwhackers remained silent for an instant. As he ran toward the falls he triggered twice at the cleft, and then rifle slugs were dusting his heels. Again he triggered and this time drew satisfaction from the screech of pain that shrilled from the rocks.

A third ambusher opened up behind him and sent him ducking down the bank of the creek, sprawling flat under the protection of the overhang of earth. In the next instant he stared at the waterfall. Behind the watery ribbon he saw a bit of color. His first thought was that a fourth man was hidden there, but he wasted no time on conjecture.

He tore up from the bank and hit for the falls, plunging waist-deep into the pool beneath it. Then drenched and panting from the exertion, he hurled himself through the tumbling cataract, a gun in each hand now. It was a toss-up who was the most startled, Wild Bill or the tow-headed youth he surprised jamming a fresh cartridge frantically into an ancient single-shot rifle.

The guns in the big cowman's hands wavered down. This wasn't the type of killer he'd expected to find behind the falls. The vengeful cast of Wild Bill's blue-joweled face eased as he appraised the lanky sixteen-year-old youth. Wide blue eyes goggled up at him, obscured by a shock of disheveled yellow hair. The youth's mouth, in his astonishment, kept opening and closing like that of a beached trout, but no sound came out. His thin arms and legs trembled in the faded, oversized garb he wore.

Wiggins saw instantly that the youth was terrified, but too proud to flee. He was full of fight and he was angry because the shell refused to slide easily into the powder-clogged breech of the old gun.

"Put it away, son," Wild Bill chuckled. "That cannon might explode in your face if you try triggerin' me."

The boy spoke harshly. "You big moose of a cutbanker! I'll part your brisket with a .75-90 if I can get this dang ca'tridge where it belongs!"

Wiggins' guns chocked into leather. "You got your breech clogged with burnt powder, son," he said. "Your cartridge won't slide in. Run your ramrod through it and she'll clear. What you want to take pot shots at me for, anyhow?"

The youth started his ramrod down the muzzle and looked up. "Ain't you one of Drag Jerribee's gunnies?"

Wild Bill stirred ominously. "If this Jerribee's the eagle-beaked hellion stashed up there in the rocks," he said, "I got his name wrote on every slug in my belts. I'm

Bill Wiggins of the Box W, and I've got no fight with jaspers like you. Who are you, anyway?"

For a moment the youth took inventory of the big cattleman and his hostility gradually fell away as he saw a certain kindliness in Wild Bill's pale eyes, a fatherly gentleness in the cut of his mouth and in the streaks of gray hair at his temples. The youth liked the face, admired the hulk below it. His straight nose wrinkled into a grin. He stuck out a grimy hand.

"Glad to meet a man that ain't on speakin' terms with Drag Jerribee," he said. "Put it there, Wiggins, an' from here on out just call me Slim."

THE big man and the thin-shanked youth threw themselves flat on their stomachs as the veil of falling water was shattered by slashing lead. Slim nudged Wiggins with a bony elbow.

"Follow me, Bill!" Slim said, and went on all fours to a small cave behind the falls. He sat at a corner and watched Wild Bill scramble up to him.

Curiosity kindled pin points of light in Slim's eyes as the cowman came up. "Mister," the youth said, "you don't look short on savvy. How come you tangle with a jiggeroo like Jerribee? That ain't nowise smart."

Wiggins punched the spent shells from his gun and reloaded. "I'll tangle with anybody who butchers my beef and tosses dead men into my special drinkin'-water," he stated. "Maybe the hombre needed killin', but my cattle are leadin' a righteous life."

A sheepish grin stole over the boy's face. His cheekbones were stained by an increasing flush.

"Gosh," he murmured, "you make me feel plumb guilty. It was *me* that done it."

Wild Bill's mouth flew open. "You mean you slaughtered my cows?"

"Shucks, no," the youth said. "I mean I tunneled the renegade who was tryin' to take my taw. Jerribee butchered your stuff when him and his bunch of killers ran out of grub."

"Then that makes this Jerribee galoot my personal meat," said Wild Bill. "But I can't read the sign on that killin', an' the attempts made on my own skin."

Random bullets clipped through the falls and snarled harmlessly past the man and the boy. Young Slim fumblingly drew a small, corroded sheet of copper from inside his shirt and displayed it. "If you had this you might savvy, Wiggins," he said. "This here shingle of copper is worth a hundred thousand pesos, American money, to Jerribee."

Once more astonishment rode roughshod through the big cowman. But before he could voice his thoughts, the youth was plunging into explanations.

"For nigh a month that jiggeroo Jerribee has hounded me like a cougar trailin' game," Slim said. "Followed me all the way from Tucson, aimin' to grab this treasure gold before I could."

"Treasure gold?" Wild Bill blurted. "That sounds mighty interestin', Slim."

Recollection darkened the boy's eyes. "It is—plumb interestin'. My uncle spilled the story to me before Jerribee killed him to get the secret. But Uncle Dan didn't talk. Drag Jerribee has tracked me everywhere, watchin' every move I made, tryin' to beat me to it or take me and make me tell."

Wiggins leaned closer, his pale eyes aglow with the spirit of adventure and mystery. "What *is* the secret?" he asked. Then he caught himself and chuckled. "Wash my ears with

sheep-dip if I ain't gettin' too nosy! Forget I asked it, Slim."

Slim scrubbed his rebellious hair back from his eyes. "That's all right, Wiggins," he placated. "You got a rep for bein' on the level I've heard of you—the hombre the Mexies call El Chubasco. They trust you. That's enough for me. But here's the yarn for what it's worth. Seems like a Mexican general's soldiers got a mite salty after fightin' six months without wages. So the general sent a messenger to Mexico City with an order to have a hundred thousand pesos, gold, shipped north to the border where he could pick it up."

"And?"

"Well, this was many years ago and they hauled it up here into the Seven Devils Hills and hid it, then sent a Mex man to the Mex general to tell him where it was buried." Slim paused. "But the Mex man never got to the Mex general. Some place along the trail a bunch of Texicans overtook the man and shot him to pieces."

"So?"

"My Uncle Dan knowed the route he took, from an old *charro's* story. Dan thought if a man was to backtrack that trail, he'd find the dead Mex man—and the message givin' the location of the cache, which the Texicans overlooked." Slim shoved the thin copper plate in front of Wild Bill's face. "This is it, Wiggins. I found it!"

The big cowman's jaw dropped. Gingerly he took the piece of corroded metal and gasped. "Where? Where'd you find it, Slim?"

Slim's arm lifted, forefinger indicating inside the cave at the mouth of which they now hunkered. "In there—from *him*." A little tremor of revulsion shot through the youth.

Wiggins let his eyes probe into the gloomy corridor and what he saw made his eyes narrow. A skeleton sat against the far wall, the moldering remnants of a uniform hanging in ribbons from the fleshless bones. High, Mexican army boots were on his feet, reaching to the knees. Across his lap was a rusty old musket. Hanging from the shoulders were powder horn and bullet pouch.

"The way I figured it," Slim said quietly, "the Texicans only *thought* they killed him—and rode on. But he was lyin' doggo, badly wounded, and crawled in here where he cashed in his chips just like you see him now. I saw the first copper plate stickin' out of his decayin' boot top. But the hombre you fished out of the creek surprised me here and got it away from me. I shot him as he was sprintin' down the bosque toward Drag Jerribee's camp. But Jerribee took the plate from him and tossed the hombre's body into the creek—"

"But this plate here," Wild Bill protested. "Was there *two* of 'em?"

"Right," said Slim. "This plate is only *half* of the map. I found it in the other boot. They can't get the gold without it."

"And it looks like we can't get out of here with or without it," Wiggins said thoughtfully. "How long you been holed-up here?"

"Five days now, I reckon," said the youngster. "Since I ran out of vittles I been catchin' fish under the falls. There's another way out, but they know about it—probably seen the smoke of my cook fire seepin' through. Buck Turlock camps up there on the ridge guardin' it."

"But if Jerribee's got half of the map," said Wiggins grimly, "*you'll* have a hard time findin' the cache."

"I know." Slim's young face set with grim determination. "But *I*

found the dead Mex messenger man here first. The secret was passed onto me by my kin. So the gold is *mine* by every right, and I'm goin' to keep on battlin' that dirty bunch of cutthroats till I get the other plate!"

Wild Bill was quick to admire the youngster's courage and determination. He hadn't the heart to tell him that this cave, the falls and the land around them were part of his Box W, his own private property, and that therefore all it contained legally belonged to him, Wild Bill Wiggins.

"What keeps them from gettin' in here," he asked abruptly, "by comin' through the other entrance?"

Slim grinned. "Three sticks and a string," he said. "When I seen them start hustlin' toward the hole I yelled to 'em that I had a gun trap rigged on it. They believed me. So I fixed up some sticks inside there, like as if it'd set off a gun—just to keep 'em at bay."

The cowman nodded approvingly. "For your size, Slim," he said, "you're about the smartest hombre in this uncurried strip of hell."

Slim disgustedly drew his patched old Levis higher on his meager shanks. "Then I just ain't big enough," he said bitterly. "Because I sure built my own grave by gettin' myself bottled up in here. Guess I ain't done you any good either, pard, by lurin' you in here with me."

Wild Bill leaned against the damp cave wall. "This is as much my fight as yours," he said placatingly. "Maybe it's your hide they want, but don't forget, it's *my* beef they been feedin' on."

THEY fell into a brooding silence for a while. Wild Bill stared into the veil of water that tumbled down before them. His angular features were pinched by unaccustomed lines. Slim drove anxious glances at him from time to time, while he fumbled with the mechanism of his old rifle. There was a shade of pleading in the boy's eyes that Wild Bill did not miss. It seemed to him that Slim was trying to convey silently that he had passed beyond his depths in peril and looked to the big cowman to put him back to safety again.

And across the corridor the skull of the Mexican soldier, who might have endured the same ordeal fifty years before, grinned mockingly at their plight.

Suddenly, with nerve-blasting sounds, a new swarm of bullets chopped through the falls. Snarling, they ricocheted about the cave. As the echoes died away, the big cattleman made his decision.

"Slim," he said flatly, "I'm gettin' out of here!"

"It's better to have slugs flyin' around you," Slim gave back quaveringly, "than into you."

"Drag Jerribee won't see me leave," the rancher snapped. His blocky jaw jutted forward. "You got any wood in here?"

Slim jerked a thumb at a pile of dry branches and cow chips near the skeleton. "*He* must have dragged it in, hopin' to use it."

Wild Bill scooped up a great armload of the material and piled it in a heap near the sloping rear-exit tunnel. "I'm goin' up for a powwow with our friend Buck Turlock," he announced. "When I drop a pebble down the shaft, you get the fire goin'. I'll do the rest."

Slim gasped. "You'll smoke us up like hickory-cured side meat."

Wiggins dusted his big hands. "Yeah," he agreed. "But we'll also give Turlock the same smoke-house treatment." And then he was hurrying back into the dark passage.

As he went he reasoned that here the stream had once passed underground in some distant age and by an upheaval had been diverted from its course, leaving the labyrinth of caverns and caves worn smooth by the long passage of water. He rounded a bend and came unexpectedly into a small chamber that seemed blazing with light. His dark-accustomed eyes blinked. Then he realized that the light was only feeble, filtering through a tangle of boulders and ferns masking the exit.

Catlike, he stole forward and peered out. He grinned at the flimsy trap of Slim's. Nevertheless the lad had brains, he told himself. Abruptly, as a slide of dust and gravel skittered down almost in his face, his gaze lashed upward. There, only six feet above on a flat slab of rock, squatted Buck Turlock—a giant of a man as large as Wild Bill himself.

Wild Bill scrutinized the renegade shrewdly, noting the black-stubbled, savage face and yellow teeth. A greasy woolen shirt, patched and buttonless, hung open almost to his belly, exposing a mat of thick, reddish hair covering a barrel chest. Rebellion rode the cowman at the ruthlessness of these renegades in attempting to starve young Slim into the open for killing. Even as he appraised the one above him, the acrid odor of smoke was beginning to reach his nostrils. The pebble he had tossed back toward Slim several moments ago was getting results.

In a few short minutes the cave was clogged with a dense smoke. Wiggins fought down a desire to cough and sprawled close to the floor for breath, watching the outlaw above through tear-burning eyes. A gust of air from the falls sent a heavy cloud surging up around Turlock and instantly a vile oath blasted down at the wheezing cowman. A hacking cough followed.

Wild Bill was ready, an eager grin stamped on his lips.

In a hurricane of sound he leaped, his batwing chaps flapping like the wings of a giant condor. Wild Bill dragged Buck Turlock from his perch. Turlock hit the floor of the chamber with a thud, a yell of surprise coming from his smoke-seared throat. A sledgelike fist shot out and the curse on the outlaw's lips was smothered by the smash of knuckles against flesh.

Buck Turlock reeled drunkenly against a wall, spitting out teeth and blood. Then with a bellow of pain and fury he charged the big cowman.

The thick fog of smoke was forgotten now in the battle for survival. Arms swinging like windmills, they slashed, hammered and battered each other.

Then it happened.

Buck Turlock gave ground suddenly and lashed out with his right boot. The toe caught Wild Bill Wiggins flush in the stomach. The wind whooshed out of him like steam from a punctured boiler. He was conscious of doubling over and then some inner sense warned him to throw himself aside. He did so just in time to avoid a second kick from the treacherous killer, a boot toe that would have caught him under the chin, breaking his neck. He hit the rock floor on his shoulder.

A harsh, mocking laugh floated to him through the smoke. Down here, below the smoke level, he could see Turlock's feet as the outlaw came forward to deliver the finishing blows. Fighting back the nausea that gripped him, the rancher gathered his muscles and rolled toward the oncoming killer, his spinning body striking the man's legs and

spilling Turlock down on top of him.

"You got a one-way ticket now, Turlock," the cowman said hoarsely.

They clinched, rolling, struggling for throat grips. Wild Bill's strength flowed back quickly down here beneath the smoke cloud. He gulped air into his lungs. Rough hands scraped along his throat and he felt Turlock's long, unclean nails scoring him. With a mighty effort the rancher batted the hands aside and then felt his fingers bite into the bristles of the renegade's throat. They closed like a vise, the thumbs driving deeper and deeper into the man's windpipe and jugular.

Buck Turlock began struggling immediately, threshing about like a rattler with its head caught in the opening of a trapdoor spider's tunnel.

Sweat stood out in beads on the cowman's forehead and the veins bulged at his temples. Harsh, gurgling sounds issued from Turlock's fast-whitening lips, sounds that were almost begging in character. But Wild Bill knew the treachery of this man. He knew it was his life or Turlock's. Wiggins' grip tightened as he coaxed more strength from his bulging muscles.

The hulking renegade died in that terrible grip, his struggles slowly subsiding until he was but a limp thing in the cowman's hands. He thrust the outlaw aside, relaxed a moment to catch his breath and restore circulation to his numbed arms. He would need perfect co-ordination between arms and hands for the gun chores he knew he would have to accomplish before he or young Slim could leave here alive. He waited long enough for his breath to become normal and for the kinks to leave his muscles, and then he was slipping through the timber toward Drag Jerribee's siege camp.

A HUNDRED feet from the rock-rimmed pocket in which the three renegades sat, the big cowman pressed back behind a tree and studied his chances. From Slim's descriptions he picked them out easily. He already knew Jerribee—the eagle-beaked, red-mouthed gun buzzard from Juarez. As he watched, the outlaw leader tilted a flask of berrateaga to his lips and downed a long, gurgling drink. Just above him, at the cleft of the rocks, stood Sim Liggett, the swart, cadaverous killer who had almost brought the cowman down. Liggett's hawklike eyes were glued on the falls, his rifle resting on a shelf of rock between the two boulders.

Across the dead fire from Jerribee squatted the half-breed killer, Cinco Slade, a gun artist with five notches in each of his pearl-handled .45s. He was thick-chested, stilt-legged, and his hands were gloved, the sign of the gunman who lives by his wits and the dexterity of his trigger fingers. From a tree nearby hung the dressed carcass of a freshly slaughtered beef, the hide still on, a Box W brand clearly visible on the right flank.

Wild Bill Wiggins raged inwardly, for he felt the renegades would remove only the choicest cuts from the steer and toss the balance into the creek; and to his way of thinking, waste was almost as bad as the steal. Grimly he found his way into a tangle of hackberry fringing the camp. The matter of his butchered beef was insignificant now, with the plight of the youth in the cave uppermost in his mind. The cards he held said that Jerribee would pay the full price of his crimes, either in court or right here and now.

Sliding his guns from their holsters, Wild Bill stepped around a broken branch slanting from a tree to

the ground. His long legs catapulted him forward with amazing speed. Not until a shout was building in his cavernous throat did the strangeness of that branch penetrate his brain. Then it was too late. Something invisible snagged about his ankles and yanked him high into the air.

A gasp of anger wrenched itself from his lips. He was whipping helplessly to and fro fifteen feet in the air, head down. And suddenly the explanation sank into his mind like a piece of ice dropped into his stomach.

Jerribee, with deadly cunning, had contrived the snare to trap Box W beef ranging through this area. But instead, he had trapped the rancher himself and Wild Bill was hanging from a rope fixed to a bent branch of the tree.

He made a desperate but futile grab for his guns as they slipped from his fingers.

Then Drag Jerribee's predatory face was upturned to him.

"You'd look a heap better hangin' the other end up, fella," the renegade mocked. "Was you callin' for some special purpose or just happen to step into my meat getter?"

Wild Bill raged at his own carelessness. "Nothin' special, mister," he said. "Just tryin' to find an owner for a couple of homeless slugs."

Liggett's hands fell like diving bullbats to his guns and they cleared leather so quickly that even Wiggins failed to perceive it. "Maybe you mean these two slugs!" he bit out, and eared back his hammers.

Jerribee halted the play with a wave of his hand. "Let him hang a spell, Sim," the owlhoot leader ordered, his voice full of mockery. "The flavor of beef always improves with time. When he's ripe, he'll beg us to perforate him."

"That's a hot one, boss." Cinco Slade laughed. "We need a little fun to bust the monotony of waitin' for young Slim to peter out so we can grab the rest of that copper plate. I read the Mex words on the half of the plate we got—so we know we need the rest of the plate to get the secret of that gold."

Wild Bill ground his teeth on his rage. The festering realization that he had failed young Slim was like a dash of cold water in his face. When this trio finished with him, and Turlock was found, it would mean Wild Bill's finish and the youth's capture and death.

He wondered how long he would last. Already his eyes felt choked from hanging down this way, and his cheeks were swelling from pounding blood. Now Drag Jerribee was talking again, his deep voice lifting like the growl of a grizzly.

"The kid's in the bag right now, he volunteered, beaming with the birth of a sudden idea. "Far as he knows, his pard there is still stalkin' us. There ain't been any shootin' to tell him different. I aim to make use of that fact."

"What's your plan, Drag?" Slade was interested. "I'm gettin' anxious to vamoose out of here with that dinero."

"Well, keep your ears up." Jerribee grinned. His black agate eyes slitted with cunning. "We'll shuck the big jigger down off the snare, take all the teeth out of his guns and belts. Then we stir up a big ruckus. After the smoke drifts off, who comes out but the big gent, carryin' Slade over his shoulder like a dead buck. At his say-so the kid comes out pronto, and we gun the kid down."

Slade's eyes narrowed. "Why pick

on me, Drag?" he protested. "He's liable to bash my skull against a rock or somethin'."

Jerribee laughed. "No he won't. Not with our guns lined up where his suspenders cross. You go along for two purposes—to lure Slim out and to see his big pard here don't get away. You'll have your gun. If he makes a false move, tunnel him."

"Well, all right," Slade agreed. "Let's get it over with."

"Cut the big cowpoke loose," Drag ordered.

"Save yourselves the trouble," Wild Bill cracked out. "I'll turn blue in the face and make winter feed for the jays before I'll see my pard tricked like that."

Jerribee's face clouded with fury. His guns leaped out and up. "Then you'll do just that!" he snarled. "I give you ten seconds to decide which you want to do—hang and rattle or string along."

Wild Bill sighed and glanced off toward the falls. He wondered what Slim would think of him if he played him rotten that way. Then something he saw near the creek pumped new courage into him. He held his voice down to a flat, helpless tone. "I reckon I'm under a forked stick, Jerribee," he said. "Cut me down."

FIVE short minutes sufficed to pull the teeth from Wild Bill Wiggins. The loops of his gun belts empty of cartridges, his guns plucked and shoved into his holsters, he was forced to shoulder the form of Cinco Slade. The rancher winced under the pressure of the gun muzzle the killer lodged in the small of his back. A slug would travel down and disembowel him. With Jerribee's snarled warnings ringing in his ears, Wild Bill started off.

As he reached the hump of rocks near the falls, Drag Jerribee and Liggett commenced firing their guns double-quick and raising blood-freezing shouts. Dust and smoke blended with the hair-raising racket. Fake death cries sheared the rumble of the falls. Then all was quiet for a second or two. On his shoulder, Slade gave Wiggins his orders.

"Move on, hombre," the half-breed husked. "Try anything funny and I'll put daylight through your innards."

Wild Bill moved on, carrying Slade, as a desperate plan formed in the rancher's mind.

"Give the kid a signal to come out," Cinco snarled in his ear.

Wiggins hesitated until he felt Slade's gun prod deeper into his back. Then the rancher called: "It's all right to come out, Slim. They're cleaned up to a man."

He saw a flash of color behind the ribbon of water, then hurried faster down the slope. If Slim came out too soon— Wild Bill's eyes were on a fallen tree just ahead as he bellowed: "It's O. K., son. The rats are chawin' dirt—"

A gasp crowded his lips as Slim's head appeared at the edge of the falls. Wiggins envisioned the two killers behind him drawing the youth in the notches of their gun sights. Abruptly then he stumbled and the arms that were clamped about Slade's legs tightened. The gunman winced.

"What're you doin?" he bit out. "One more slip and you get it!"

Wiggins had gone to his knees and as he came up he hurled Slade's body straight before him into a clump of ferns and small boulders along the bosque. Gun flame seared the rancher's back. A slug ripped along his trousers and almost tore his boot off when it smashed through his spur rowel. But in his hand he gripped Slade's second gun.

Slade's body hit the rocks with a heavy thud and the pitiful cry that came from him made Wild Bill a bit pale, for he knew the man's spine was broken by his fall. The rancher threw himself behind the log and twisted into position as Jerribee and Liggett came running down the slope. Then they saw Slade's body squirming among the ferns and halted.

By then young Slim was darting to Wiggins' side. "Hold 'em, pard!" the youth was screaming. "I'm comin' to side you!"

Slim threw himself down beside Wiggins as the two outlaws on the slope cut loose. Limned like owls in the open, they stood half crouched, ripping the damp log to shreds with their bullets. Wild Bill winced as a slug nicked through his shoulder and burned the skin. Then his gun was erupting death.

Sim Liggett took the first one through the brisket, slewed around and, like a chicken with its head lopped off, tumbled head-over-heels down the slant to plunge into the pool beneath the falls. He went under beneath the weight of the falling water and disappeared.

"Pitch up or take it, Jerribee!" Wiggins now stood up, his gun leveled at the panic-stricken outlaw leader above. Jerribee cast about for some covert and saw none handy enough. Like a cornered catamount he whirled.

Slim's rifle exploded before Wiggins could trigger. The ball of lead that caught Jerribee would have felled an elephant in its tracks. It drove him backward, setting him down with a thud. For an instant he sat there, his mouth working as if trying to say something. His left hand went up to a gaping hole on his chest, and then he wilted down, his body spinning forward to lodge against the log at Wild Bill's feet.

"That's for Uncle Dan." Slim's face was white. "The low-down cutbanker! I promised him two ounces of lead instead of a ton of gold. He's got it now!" He prodded the still form with the muzzle of his smoking rifle. It struck the shingle of corroded copper hidden beneath Jerribee's shirt. Slim reached down. His hand shook as he plucked half the strange map from its resting place.

"I reckon you've won, Slim," Wild Bill said quietly. "You can go get your gold now and become a gentleman the rest of your life."

Slim's eyes were moist as he looked up. "Gentleman! Me?" he murmured. "I cut my teeth on a pair of spurs and I'd be a whelp to run out on a pard of the same breed, wouldn't I? Wiggins, if it wasn't for you I'd be cold fruit in an undertaker's packin' box or feedin' the fishes on your private drinkin' water. Come on an' help me find that cache. Seems to me you need just about half of it to put your Box W on a ten-hand basis!"

Wild Bill Wiggins sighed and made no protest.

THE END

Zene let go with a looping right and his bunched fists found a solid target.

When Martin Clay's ruthless hired gun-slingers began playing their deadly game, Zene Ramsey suspected he had signed on as a fighting hand with a trail herd of—

BEEF BOUND FOR BOOTHILL

by NORMAN A. FOX

SUNSET had unfurled its crimson banners far to the west when Zene Ramsey came riding into Fadeaway. But if the descending dusk rubbed some of the rawness out of the town, it also wrapped the straggly main street in a mantle of mystery, the brooding somberness of the scene reminding Zene that trail's end meant trouble. Thus he hesitated on the outskirts, knowing he might yet turn back, but knowing full well that he wouldn't. And because no greater lure than a piece of tin, two inches

by three, had drawn him here, he named himself a brainless fool and prodded his cayuse onward.

This was cow country, flat and tawny, and the dust of the weary miles lay upon Zene's lean length, turning his range garb gray. Thin-faced and sunburned, he looked older than his twenty-odd years, for up in Last Chance County, to the north, he was a deputy sheriff and star-toters matured quickly in that turbulent land. But he'd unpinned his badge at the county line, and he might have been a footloose ranny riding through. Into Fadeaway, he halted before the first saloon. He wanted information, and any of the half-dozen loungers beneath the wooden awning could probably give it to him.

"Which is the trail to Bullhide Brackett's Moon Bar spread?" he asked from his saddle.

Whereupon one of the loungers stiffened to alert attention, an overly dressed fellow who stood no more than five foot three and was almost as wide, fat hanging upon him in folds. His was a jovial moonface, but instinct told Zene that the good fellowship oozing from the man was largely pretense, a bulwark to hide his hardness.

"Welcome to Fadeaway," the fat man said and rolled a gold toothpick the width of his mouth. "You must be the ranny who's come to help haze the Moon Bar trail herd to Ophir. But consider, friend. Whatever you hope to get out of that deal, I'll double if you'll ride for me instead."

None of which was as it should be, and Zene stiffened with alarm. The talk of a trail herd made no savvy to him, but he was here to help the Moon Bar. Yet nobody knew that, and the fat man was, therefore, a mind reader. But the surety in the fellow's tone unleashed a surging antagonism within Zene, and he said curtly: "I'm not interested, mister. You answering my question?"

"Not interested? Well, it's a free country," the fat man sighed. "I'm happy to say you needn't bother riding to the Moon Bar. Bullhide's staying in town these days. Ride on till you hit the White Elephant Livery Stable. Next to it is a green cottage and beyond that a red frame house and beyond both you'll find Bullhide. There's no changing your mind, friend?"

"No!" Zene said and nudged his horse. His back to the group, he had the sensation that men were moving swiftly, dispersing into the shadows, but he kept his face forward, seeing the sign of the White Elephant. Past it, he found the cottage and the frame house. Then he came to an abrupt halt, his jaw sagging as he sensed the meaning of the fat man's macabre humor. For here was the town cemetery, and just inside the picket fence was a new grave, its pine headboard bearing the name of Bullhide Brackett!

IT fetched Zene out of his saddle, that sight, something chill running through him. Truly Bullhide Brackett was staying in town—staying for good! This had been the fat man's emphatic way of warning Zene that any friend of Bullhide's could expect a like resting place. And in the instant that Zene understood, trouble unleashed itself as a bullet zinged past him.

Clearing the picket fence in a wild leap, Zene hurled himself behind the nearest headboard. A half dozen guns were spitting out of the darkness from as many directions. Those men who'd dispersed from the saloon front had sought vantage points to cut him down! This much Zene

guessed, and the rest didn't matter. You answered the challenge of gunfire with gunfire and asked the questions afterward.

Forty-five bucking, Zene speared a shot, picking a gun flash for a target and rolling to a new position as lead pelted the headboard he'd chosen to shelter him. Again Zene fired and again he shifted position. More bullets spattered close, but he was keeping those hidden gunmen at a distance. Scant consolation in that! The fracas was settling into a siege, and the odds against him meant it could only have one outcome.

It looked, Zene reflected grimly, as though a trail that had begun in gun smoke was ending the same way. There'd been guns that night, just a few weeks before, when he'd found three men hunkered before a lonely cabin high in the Saskatoon Hills up in Last Chance County. The sheriff's force had ridden far that week, cutting sign on outlaws who'd lifted a currency shipment from the Last Chance stage after killing the driver —a robbery netting them exactly nothing since the bank, anticipating trouble, had marked the currency, and the outlaws hadn't dared dispose of it. Riding alone, Zene Ramsey had caught up with the road agents. Powder had burned and men had died.

They'd started the fight, those three, slinging lead at sight of his badge, but Zene had toted two corpses back to Last Chance town. The third man had made a dash by moonlight, after hours of sniping, leaving two dead men behind. One, a bearded brute, was unmistakably Dutch Marsden, long-sought owlhooter of the Saskatoon Hills, and the other, a younger man, a stranger to the law of Last Chance, had been identified as Hal Brackett. There'd been papers in his wallet a letter among them—and a tintype.

Zene packed that wallet now, and because of the letter it contained, a letter that was an urgent plea for help, he had headed south. Or so he'd told himself. Yet in his secret heart he knew the tintype had lured him on, for it pictured a girl whose beauty haunted Zene.

Whatever the reason, he was here and the guns were spitting again, but this time it was Zene who was slated to die. Already that ring of gunfire was drawing tighter, and, with deeper darkness descending, he had the feeling that others were creeping among the headboards. Moving warily, Zene edged toward the fence again, almost colliding with someone bulking in the gloom.

They were too close for gun work, he and this shapeless man, and Zene sent his fist lashing, hoping he'd hit a vulnerable spot. The man crashed across a headboard, the sound noisy enough to draw the attention of others. "There he goes!" someone shouted, and Zene was sure it was the fat man's voice. Sprinting toward the fence, Zene leaped over it.

The guns were yammering again, and he'd leaped from the frying pan into the fire, Zene decided desperately. He was out of the cemetery, but his horse was gone—scared into bolting—and there was nothing to do but sprint aimlessly, hoping to escape. Yet even as Zene made the try, he turned cold with the consciousness that there could be no escape.

THEN he heard the drumbeat of racing hoofs, and suddenly a knot of horsemen lunged out of the night, half a dozen of them, charging straight toward him, firing as they came. More friends of the fat man? But the riders were turning their

guns against those who encircled Zene.

"You, stranger!" a newcomer cried. "Pile aboard!"

Instantly Zene was vaulting up behind a saddle, wrapping his arms around the rider's waist. "We've got him!" another, unmistakably feminine, voice cried. "Head for the Moon Bar, boys! Here's one trick Martin Clay isn't taking!"

Martin Clay? The fat man! Remembering Hal Brackett's letter, the affair made a little more sense to Zene, but he didn't pause to ponder about it. The horsemen were wheeling, clattering up Fadeaway's main street, the gunfire fading behind them.

Once upon the prairie the riders reined to a walk, and Zene had his first chance to speak.

"I'm thankin' you," he panted. "They just about had my hide tacked to the wall."

"It's lucky we loped into town," the girl said. "And luckier yet that we heard a stranger had asked for Bullhide Brackett, only to be sent to the cemetery by Martin Clay. With guns popping in that direction, we bought in."

"You're Bonnie Brackett, Hal's sister?" Zene asked.

"Yes," she said. "And you?"

"Zene Ramsey," he answered, knowing the name would have no significance since the letter the sheriff had sent to the Moon Bar concerning Hal's death hadn't mentioned Zene. Yet he wondered what she'd say if he added: "I'm the deputy who put a slug into your brother."

"You came to see my father," she said huskily. "I'm sorry. He was killed not long ago. But—"

"I was Hal's friend," Zene lied. "I happened to know he was wanted bad at home, and I likewise know he won't be comin' I asked the way to Bullhide's spread because I figgered on lendin' a hand in Hal's place. I sort o' owe it to him."

"Now I savvy!" a man riding at Zene's elbow blurted. "Clay fixed to bushwhack this gent because he thought the stranger was me! You see, mister, I sent a postcard to the Bracketts telling 'em I'd be along to help. A postcard's probably common property in Fadeaway. I loped in yesterday but found the Moon Bar without coming through town. When you asked for Bullhide tonight, Clay just naturally figgered you was me!"

"Then you're both Hal's friends!" Bonnie cried. "Ramsey, meet the Pondera Kid. Or maybe you already know each other. Looks like the Moon Bar will be able to fight after all! With dad gone and Hal killed by some bounty-hunting skunk of a badge toter, I about lost hope."

Beneath the cover of darkness, Zene winced and once again named himself a brainless fool for buying into a dead man's deal. But now the moon nudged above the eastern horizon, and in that faint light he had his first look at Bonnie, seeing the dark beauty of her and knowing she was all her picture had promised. And at the same time he had a glimpse of the Pondera Kid.

A riding riddle, the Kid. There was youthfulness in his tall, lean body, but the lock of black hair plastered against his forehead was sprinkled with gray. He wasn't a man to remember until you saw his face. Half of it was handsome enough, the right half, but along his left cheek ran a jagged knife scar from eyebrow to chin, drawing his features together.

And then Zene remembered him! And with the knowledge that they'd met before, Zene wondered how long

it would be before the Kid denounced him to Bonnie as the killer of her brother. For the Pondera Kid was the third man who'd been cornered at that cabin in the Saskatoon Hills, the one who had escaped the night Hal Brackett had died.

CHAPTER II

ARMED TRUCE

MIDNIGHT was near, the buildings of the Moon Bar sprawling ahead, the peeled-pole corrals that held a beef herd glimmering like interlocked skeleton fingers in the night, and still the Pondera Kid gave no sign that he recognized Zene. This much reprieve was more than Zene had expected, and he began to wonder if the Kid remembered him after all. That siege in the Saskatoons had been by night, and Zene had glimpsed the escaping Kid only by the merest chance. Perhaps the Pondera Kid had no inkling that he rode beside the deputy who had once traded lead with him.

But if one danger was thus diminishing, the awesome shadows of one other still remained, for Zene recalled the bushwhack welcome Martin Clay had given him. Death rode with long spurs on this range, and Zene Ramsey had brushed with that black rider. Once they were into the ranchhouse, the Pondera Kid trailing after Bonnie while the hands headed for the bunkhouse, Zene launched blunt questions.

"Just why is this Martin Clay working against the Moon Bar?" he asked. "And what happened to your father, miss? I'd like to know how things stand."

With lamplight washing across the room, the place had an air of hominess and Bonnie fitted into the scene even though she wore riding garb. But, leaning against the open fireplace, her black hair cascading as she swept her sombero away, she was, symbolically, a harassed, defiant girl backed against the wall by the weight of the odds against her.

"Martin Clay's wanted the Moon Bar for over fifteen years," she said bitterly. "The spread has better graze than his Squared C, and he tried to buy out dad at a ridiculous price. Now he's got us where he wants us. With the last two years so dry, dad mortgaged the place to the Fadeaway bank. That way he could have carried on till he recouped, but Martin Clay bought the mortgage. He's foreclosing in ten days."

"Clay spoke of a trail drive to Ophir," Zene said thoughtfully. "Figgering I was the Kid, here, he offered me double if I'd throw in with him."

"The Moon Bar has a prize shorthorn herd," Bonnie explained. "Beef is at rock bottom this spring, but maybe you've heard of the gold strike in Ophir Gulch up in Last Chance County. Those miners will pay fabulous prices for beef. Once our herd is delivered there, I'll be able to pay off that mortgage mighty fast."

BUT Zene, pacing the room, sensed her secret fear that Martin Clay would stop that trail drive. "And your dad, miss?" he asked.

"Hal and dad were estranged, cowboy," Bonnie said. "After a senseless quarrel, Hal ran away fifteen years ago when he was just a kid and I was only five. Years later I managed to get in touch with him and we swapped letters. When I wrote Hal of our troubles, he sent money to redeem the mortgage. It's no secret now how he got that money, but if you knew Hal, you

know that robbing the Last Chance stage was the only crooked thing he ever did. Only some glory-hunting lawman—"

She paused, fighting back tears. "We had no idea the money he sent was stolen," she went on. "Getting it made dad mighty happy, for it proved Hal had forgotten their old quarrel. But dad made the mistake of bragging that he was able to pay Clay off. Somewhere on the trail to the Squared C he was bushwhacked and the money stolen!"

"But the law!" Zene exclaimed, feeling the stare of the Pondera Kid who was slouched in a chair. "Does the law let this Clay hombre get away with anything?"

The girl shrugged wearily. 'Where's the proof that Clay murdered dad? How could you even prove he tried to bushwhack you tonight? You loped into town, asked a question and probably got a civil answer. Later somebody tried gunning you. Did you see Clay triggering? No; he's too clever for that!"

She smiled wanly. "See what kind of game you're up against, cowboy? Clay's got money and he's lured our younger riders away. He isn't going to let the Moon Bar slip through his fingers if he can help it. Come morning we'll be pointing our herd toward Ophir, but likely that beef will be bound for boothill. Still want to string along?"

"I reckon," Zene said briefly. Bonnie gave him her hand, a firm mannish grip, but their eyes really sealed the compact between them. And her heartfelt gratefulness, Zene decided, was reward enough to discount the dangers that might lie ahead.

The Pondera Kid came to his feet, a fine figure of a man until he turned his head and the lamplight made a glistening snake of the scar on his cheek. "A hard day tomorrow," he observed. "I'll show you where we bunk, Ramsey."

But once out into the shadows of the yard, the Kid laid his hand upon Zene's shoulder, spinning him about, and his voice was flat and brittle. "Lawman," he said. "Just what in blazes is your game?"

So the Kid did know the truth! But Zene's own antagonism matched the scar-faced man's. "I might ask you the same!" Zene retorted. "I couldn't place your name, even after I recollected where I'd seen you last. But the Pondera Kid has quite a rep up along the Marias. A hired gunhand who's managed to keep just within the law! You're the kind Martin Clay would likely have on his pay roll. And I'm supposed to believe you're here because you happened to know Hal Brackett!"

"At least I did know him," the Kid sneered. "The only time you ever saw Hal was over the barrel of your gun. And now you're passing yourself off as Hal's friend to his own sister!"

Producing a worn wallet, Zene extracted a letter and a tintype from it. "This was in Hal's pocket," he said. "I didn't turn it over to the coroner after identity was established. Here, read it. There's light enough from the moon."

The Kid obeyed, reading the letter aloud:

"DEAR HAL:

"This will be short for I must get it off to you quickly. That old trouble between dad and Martin Clay has come to a head. Clay's bought the mortgage on the Moon Bar. Ten thousand dollars will lift it, but money's scarcer than hen's teeth these days.

"I'm hoping you can help, Hal. If you can't send money, come back home at least. That alone would put new heart in Bullhide Brackett. The Moon Bar is fight-

ing for its life and we need you, Hal. And I'd like to see the big brother I can scarcely remember.

"Your loving sister,
"BONNIE."

Tucking the letter away, Zene glanced at the tintype before stowing it in the wallet. "Now do you savvy why I'm here?" he asked.

THE Pondera Kid sucked in his breath. "You mean you figger it's your game now because you put Hal six feet under?" he demanded.

"That's hard for you to savvy, eh, Kid?" Zene said. "That letter haunted me from the moment I read it. I had to come."

"I still think your badge fetched you," growled the Kid. "It's me you're after! But you can't pin that stage robbery on me, or the murder of the driver! That was Dutch Marsden's dirty work. Yeah, Hal threw in with him because he was desperate to raise ten thousand. And after he'd got the money and sent his split to Bullhide, he sweated because the papers said the money was marked. That's the way Hal became an owlhooter."

"And how did you fit in?" Zene demanded.

"I didn't," snapped the Kid. "I stumbled onto Hal and Dutch in the Saskatoons and spent a couple days with 'em. Hal told me the whole story then. Him and me knowed each other around the Marias and we was right friendly. When you showed up that night, tin badge, I had no choice but to make a stand along with Hal and Dutch when the fight started. Afterwards I come down here to see what I could do for Hal's folks."

"Maybe you were only an innocent bystander that night in the hills," Zene admitted. "And maybe you weren't. In any case, my badge is no good in this county."

"We cross the county line before we reach Ophir," the Kid said pointedly.

Zene shrugged. "She needs us—both of us. So far as I'm concerned, we're just a couple of cowpokes till the herd is sold."

"A truce, eh?" the Kid observed. "But suppose I tell her what happened in the Saskatoons? She'd hate your guts, Ramsey. She'd send you packin' tonight and you'd lose your chance to stick on my trail into Last Chance County."

"You won't tell her," Zene guessed. "You know she needs every hand who'll ride. If you're on the level yourself, you're giving me my chance."

"With one provision," the Kid interjected. "You've fallen for her, Ramsey. I can see that, and I saw the look in her eyes when she shook hands with you. Maybe you're thinking she'll never know who killed Hal. But it's no go, badge toter. We'll play partners till the drive's over, savvy. But I'm keeping my mouth shut only if I get your word that you'll never see her afterwards."

"Got an ax of your own to grind?" Zene said thinly.

"I don't have to tell you my reason," retorted the Kid. "Do we strike a bargain?"

Zene nodded. "I have no choice. Now, show me that bunk, feller. It'll be daylight before long."

Whereupon the Pondera Kid pointed out the quarters of the crew, and Zene Ramsey headed for the bunkhouse. But the Kid didn't trail after him, and when Zene tumbled into an empty bunk he heard the beat of hoofs. The Kid was mounted and heading into the night. What nocturnal trail drew that man of

mystery in this dark hour, Zene wondered? And still pondering the riddle, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER III

TRAITOR ON THE TRAIL

THEY pointed the Moon Bar herd north at dawn, nearly a thousand head of fairly prime shorthorns, and once the clamor and confusion of getting underway was over, the cattle were shaped into a blunt arrowhead, men falling into their assigned positions.

At breakfast Bonnie had talked to the Moon Bar crew, the four salty oldsters who had ridden to Zene's rescue in Fadeaway the night before. These men—big Pete Westover, lanky Bill Gideon, squat Pronto Preston and Happy Harkness of the drooping mustache and doleful mien—knew the meaning of loyalty. All four had turned deaf ears to any inducements Martin Clay tried to offer them.

"You know how important this drive is, boys," Bonnie told them. "It's a clear slate for the Moon Bar and a bonus for you all if we get through. But you're taking big chances, and it's only fair that you have a say about things. Any ideas?"

The Pondera Kid had glanced up. "I crossed the driest stretch in Montana, coming down from the north," he said. "It's no place to haze cattle if you figger on keeping tallow on 'em. Likely Martin Clay won't count on us heading that way. But there's a spring in the middle of the wasteland, and I can point the herd to it."

His proposed strategy finally won general approval, and the Kid was voted trail boss for the first phase of the drive.

"That wasteland is called the Furnace Flats," Zene said. "It leads into the hill country and Caprock Canyon, the back door to Ophir. The canyon will cut a day off our drive. I hadn't thought about that, since it didn't make sense to cross the flats. But it's a good idea, going where Clay won't expect us!"

The Kid's trail hadn't brought him through Caprock, and it was decided that Zene would take over point position once the Furnace Flats were behind. And now the drive was underway. Bonnie and the Kid up pointing, Zene and Pete Westover at the flanks, while Pronto Preston ate the dust of the drag. A mile behind the cattle the chuck wagon lumbered on, Happy Harkness guiding it, while off to the west Bill Gideon hazed the remuda.

Good men these, top hands who knew the ropes. But a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and Zene fell to wondering about the Pondera Kid. What motive really prompted that scar-faced outlaw who'd never turned his hand except for gain? Zene didn't know, but the Pondera Kid would bear watching.

THEY made fifteen miles that day, putting the Moon Bar well behind them and bedding down on the edge of the Furnace Flats. With the dawn each mile was drier and hotter than the one that had slipped behind, and by midafternoon, with the sun a malevolent brassy disk overhead, the herd was bawling piteously. Night came none too soon, but it gave no respite from the grind of the day. The herd was hazed onward by starlight in the hope of finding water.

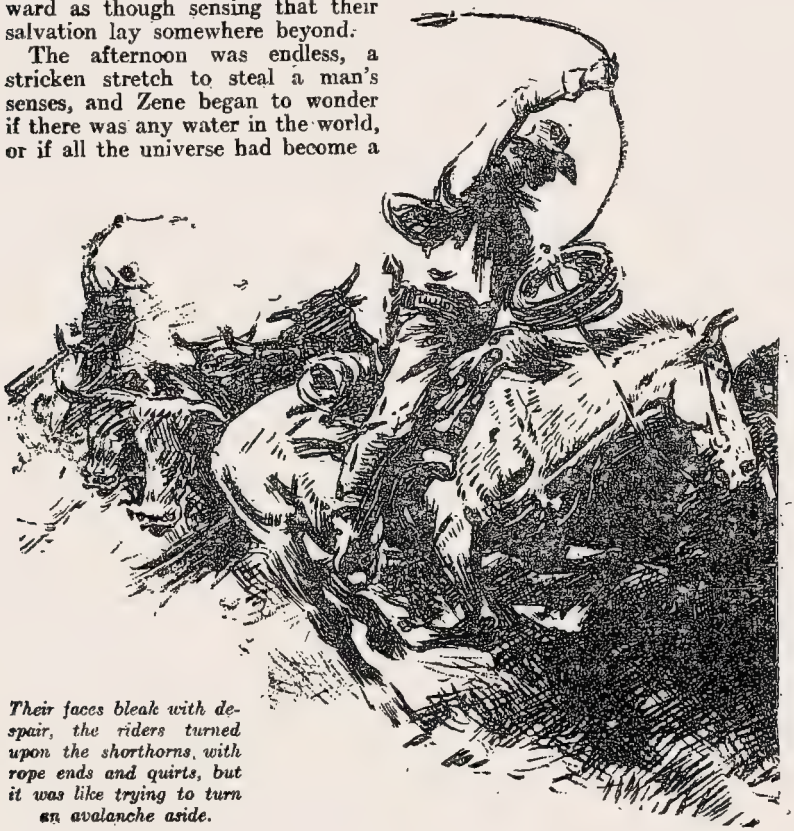
"It can't be much farther," the Pondera Kid assured them when they finally made camp. "I didn't pay a heap of attention when I come through here, seeing as I didn't know;

then, that I'd be pointing cattle this way. We'll reach that waterhole tomorrow, for sure."

But the morning, at least, proved the Kid a false prophet, the land stretching ahead as waterless as ever, the sun climbing to make saddle leather too hot to touch. The dry drive was beginning to tell on the men as well as the cattle, making them cantankerous and irritable. By noon most of them were in point position. No longer did recalcitrant bunch quitters try to amble off; the entire herd was heading stolidly forward as though sensing that their salvation lay somewhere beyond.

The afternoon was endless, a stricken stretch to steal a man's senses, and Zene began to wonder if there was any water in the world, or if all the universe had become a blighted land, endless and arid. Then in the depth of his despair, someone raised a choked cry, "Water!" and Zene lifted his eyes, seeing the sparkle of sunlight on a broad waterhole half a mile ahead.

Forcing his jaded cayuse into a gallop, Zene reached the water first, the others close behind as he flung out of his saddle at the edge of the hole. A subterranean spring bubbled here, and though the greedy ground absorbed the water almost as fast as it gushed forth, there was a big pool. But with his lips lower-



Their faces bleak with despair, the riders turned upon the shorthorns, with rope ends and quirts, but it was like trying to turn an avalanche aside.

ing to the water, Zene lurched to his feet, despair crowding him again. A bloated gopher lay beside the pool—all the sign a man needed.

"Keep the cattle away!" Zene croaked. "The water's poisoned!"

Their faces bleak with despair, the riders turned upon the shorthorns with quirts and rope ends, and it was like trying to turn an avalanche aside, for the herd had smelled the water and fought to reach it. But at long last the six men and Bonnie forced the cattle on past the pool, and Zene, sleeving sweat from his face, leveled his gaze at the Pondera Kid.

"It was a smart idea, crossing the flats to fool Martin Clay," Zene said. "Only it didn't work. He's here. We've just had the proof of it."

A sack of arsenic had been dumped into that pool, probably. Once the poison was removed, the water would clear itself in a day or so, but there wasn't time to wait—not with two dry days behind them.

The Kid ran his tongue along parched lips. "We didn't fool Clay, that's plain. Our only chance lies in the fact that I miscalculated the location of the pool. It's not so far to the north edge of the flats as I believed."

Zene choked back hot words of suspicion, knowing that an accusation without proof had no worth, and knowing also that there was nothing to do but go on. And so the herd was hazed northward, two steers dropping from exhaustion that afternoon. When night came the cattle refused to be bedded. Clearer-minded, Zene might have understood the significance of that, especially since hills loomed ahead, but it was a long time before he sensed that the shorthorns had smelled water again.

Thus they came upon a creek near midnight as they passed beyond the flats and into a broken, brushy country where a stream meandered between fringing willow groves. This creek was too big to be contaminated, and the cattle, breaking into a run, stampeded to it. And here

the Pondera Kid decided to stop for the night.

"We'll nighthawk, same as usual." he announced. "Not much chance the herd will wander far from water right soon, but I'm remembering that Martin Clay's somewhere hereabouts."

HE took the first shift for himself, the time-honored right of a trail boss, and Zene shared it with him, riding along the opposite side of the bedded herd, thoughtfully studying the moon-washed figure of the Kid from afar. Martin Clay knew they'd taken the waterless trail, and that choice had been the Kid's. Martin Clay had bought more than one man away from the Moon Bar.

Yet all this was speculation, and Zene hated himself for it. The Kid doubted him, and he mistrusted the Kid—yet where was proof that either was working against the other? But when Zene sought his blankets after the shift was over, sleep refused to come to him, and at last he sat bolt upright, brought alert by a queer sensation that all was not as it should be.

Yonder the chuck wagon glimmered, and since Bonnie bedded inside it, and Gideon and Preston were nighthawking, there should be three mounds to betoken as many sleeping men. But there were only two. Pulling on his boots, Zene slapped gear on his picketed horse. Far to the west, across a stretch of open country, a horseman was silhouetted against the setting moon, the slope of his shoulders identifying him. Once again the Pondera Kid rode by night—and this time Zene Ramsey was following him.

The trail the Kid picked was erratic, cutting back to tangled country, and he appeared to be diligently searching for sign, piling out of his saddle every few minutes. And soon it became plain to Zene that horsemen had passed this way lately. He lost the Kid, but he finally found the scar-faced man's tethered horse at the mouth of a rocky gorge.

With the moon gone, the gorge was a void of darkness. Leaving his own horse, Zene stole forward on foot, knowing the Kid had to be somewhere close. Then Zene was blinking as he groped around a turn. Ahead a campfire winked amid a clump of trees, the firelight washing the rocky wall of the gorge. Here was a comfortable camp with a half dozen men limned by the fire. And prominent among them was the fat form of Martin Clay.

The Pondera Kid stood before Clay who squatted on a log, listening intently while the Kid gesticulated. Inching as close as he dared, Zene still couldn't hear what was being said, yet he needed no further proof that the Kid stood among these men as a friend, not a foe. Martin Clay was fumbling in his coat pocket, producing a wallet. Extracting a sheaf of currency from it, he passed the money over to the Kid who tucked it into his own pocket.

Swiftly Zene faded backward to his horse. Anger seething through him, urged that he wait here for the Kid's return, denounce him as a traitor and force a showdown. But common sense dictated that he, Zene, get back to the herd. This was no place for a fracas—not with Martin Clay and his hirelings within gunshot. And with Clay so close, it behooved the Moon Bar to get the herd moved out of danger.

COMING back to the Moon Bar camp, Zene quickly aroused the sleeping cowpokes. "We're making a night drive," he announced tersely.

"Martin Clay's outfit isn't far off. We've got to be long gone before sunup."

Bonnie clambered from the chuck wagon by the time the shorthorns were forced to their feet, and Zene told her of his intention. "But the Pondera Kid?" she cried. "Where's he?"

"Scouting," Zene said slowly. "Him and me found Clay's camp together. He's keeping an eye on Clay while we get moving."

And somehow that lie tasted clean on his lips, for he knew that the professed loyalty of two men who claimed to be Hal Brackett's friends had given this girl a renewed faith that mustn't be destroyed. But he hurried away lest the truth show in his face, wheeling his cayuse and lending a hand with the herd.

The crew had dug lanterns out of the chuck wagon, and by their feeble light the drive was started, the shorthorns splashing across the creek. Once beyond the water, they headed north again, finding themselves in a land of coulees and canyons, lesser gulches that all converged toward wide Caprock Canyon. With the shorthorns pointed into a coulee there was no work for the flank riders, the sloping walls of the ravine keeping the cattle in line.

Yet such places as these were perfect for ambush, and Zene rode at point position with fear in his heart, knowing that Martin Clay might easily have maneuvered ahead of them. Nothing is easier to trail than a herd since it tramples a wide swath wherever it passes, and the noise of the drive would draw any prowlers of the night. And while Zene contemplated the danger that might come, danger became a reality, materializing out of the dawn-streaked darkness.

There was no warning. There wasn't so much as a glimpse of shadowy horsemen. Yet something was rolling down the west slope of the coulee, rolling straight toward the leaders of the herd, something with a sputtering fuse trailing from it. A powder keg! Someone had set fire to a powder keg and sent it bounding down the slope.

Instinctively Zene dug spurs into his horse, shouting a warning at the same time, but his words were lost in the roar of an explosion, a sheet of flame rearing upward.

The fire had reached the powder before the keg was more than halfway down the slope. Thus the explosion was harmless enough in itself, but the results were all that the enemy had undoubtedly planned they would be. One minute the weary cattle had been plodding listlessly along, heads drooping. But with that thunderous flash of flame to panic them, they were instantly charging forward. Thus the mad stampede started, and Zene Ramsey was carried along with it, a chip tossed by a torrent of fear-stricken beef.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEVIL'S DEADLINE

THERE was nothing to do but ride the stampede. Quirting desperately, Zene kept ahead of that oncoming herd. One misstep would mean disaster, for if his horse went down he'd be flung full into the pathway of the cattle. They lunged along behind him, bellowing wildly, hoofs pounding, a surging sea of horns and backs.

But it was a one-sided race. The Furnace Flats had taken a great deal out of Zene's horse, and though the cattle were weary, too, they had blind fear to goad them.

Then the dark mouth of an intersecting coulee loomed before Zene.

Forcing a last spurt of speed out of his horse, he pulled ahead, frantically neck-reining toward the other coulee. Maybe the herd would follow him into it, maybe it wouldn't. That was the gamble. But as he made the abrupt angle, his horse faltered and went down, catapulting Zene.

He alighted on all fours, stricken with the thought that he might still be trampled by the fringe of the herd, even if the shorthorns lunged on ahead. And in that grim moment he was dimly aware that a rider was roaring down the slope of this second coulee, racing toward him. A hand hooked under his armpit, and he was half-dragged, half-carried out of harm's way. And with all this happening quickly, the rider had released him before Zene saw that he was the Pondera Kid.

He owed the scar-faced man his life, but the Kid was a traitor and the gratitude that might have welled within Zene was lost beneath the greater flood of anger.

"You sneaking double crosser!" he shouted. "You rode into Fadeaway the night before the drive and told Clay you'd talk us into crossing the flats. How else did he know to go ahead and poison that waterhole? And tonight you took his pay for more dirty work!"

His hand fell to his hip, but his fingers came away empty. He'd lost his gun in the fall! But the Kid, seeing that motion, dipped his own hand, a .45 flowing into it.

"I've told you I don't have to give you my reasons for doing things, tin badge!" the Kid snapped. "I—"

But Zene wasn't listening. Oblivious to the Kid's leveled weapon, he was pawing the ground, seeking his own gun. Then suddenly the Kid wheeled his mount, climbing the coulee's slope till he merged with the brush-fringed crest and was lost. Riders were pouring into the coulee, the Moon Bar crew, and Zene realized that the herd had passed on down the other coulee.

"Zene!" Bonnie panted, piling out of her saddle. "When we found your horse trampled to death—"

The concern in her face told Zene all he needed to know, and he took her in his arms, but only for an instant. There was work to be done. "Clay's fixed us!" he said wrathfully. "The herd's scattered all over creation, and it'll take weeks to comb 'em out of these hills. We'd better be riding."

GETTING a fresh horse from the remuda, Zene borrowed a gun from Pronto Preston and led the crew on up the coulee. They were a dejected group of riders who slumped in their saddles beneath the weight of disaster. But an hour later Happy Harkness let out a wild whoop of joy, for there, ahead of them, stood the spent Moon Bar herd. And the miracle was that all the cattle were here together.

At first it made no sense, but the ways of cattle are freakish and blind luck had been with the Moon Bar. Instead of the shorthorns splitting up, heading into a dozen different intersecting coulees, they had kept bunched.

The chuck wagon lumbered up and they made camp for a few hours, part of the crew guarding while the others slept. Then they were forging onward, putting more miles behind them, heading ever northward, the country becoming more wild and tangled with each hour.

And always they rode with guns ready and eyes alert, though the sky smiled and all was peaceful and

serene. But this respite from danger fooled Zene not one whit. He knew the manner of Martin Clay's fighting, and he knew the fat man would strike again as he had before, unexpectedly and from cover.

Men slept fitfully that night, the nighthawkers riding with guns in hands, Bonnie spending hours on the chuck-wagon seat, a rifle across her lap. But the dawn came without an attack. By noon the herd was skirting Caprock River.

"We follow the river from here on," Zene told Bonnie. "A few miles north, it flows into Caprock Canyon. Once through the canyon and we'll be into Ophir Gulch. We should see the end of the trail before sundown."

Bonnie smiled wanly, saying nothing, but he knew she was thinking that with success almost in sight they'd meet Martin Clay again. It had to be. Once into Ophir and the game would be over. That meant showdown would come this very day.

Yet still the sky smiled and peace brooded upon the land, a hawk wheeling slowly overhead. Then the dark, frowning walls of Caprock Canyon closed in on them as they followed the river up the gloomy gorge, moving parallel to the left bank. The canyon floor was rocky in places, brush-mottled in others, a sprinkling of timber often crowding up to the perpendicular walls. Sometimes the blunt arrowhead of beef maintained formation, sometimes the shorthorns had to string out. But always they moved northward until that moment in late afternoon when Bonnie, riding at point beside Zene, laid a startled hand upon his arm.

"Martin Clay!" she cried.

Ahead was a barrier of brush, stretching from the river bank to the canyon wall, and there was no mistaking the fat horseman who came riding out of it, walking his horse straight toward them. His right hand upraised, Martin Clay smiled benevolently, to all appearances a jovial man bent upon good fellowship. But he wore a gun today.

"Good afternoon, friends," he said warmly. "You weren't thinking of continuing onward, were you? I've come to warn you that that's quite out of the question."

"Why, blast you!" Zene rapped, his hand falling to his borrowed gun. "Do you think—"

"I wouldn't do that, friend," Clay advised. "You see, my boys are back there in the brush and one has a rifle lined on you. If I wiggled a finger, you'd be dead." He paused, sighing. "The canyon walls almost pinch together about a half mile north. We've made camp there. A strategic spot. We could keep an army from passing through, if we had to. Sorry, folks; it's the end of the trail."

"So you've quit pretending to be law-abiding," Bonnie said scornfully.

"You're not going through!" Clay snapped, his mask of joviality completely stripped away. "You fools, I might have stopped you any time today, but it was much simpler to beat you into the canyon and block

the trail. You're licked! Can't you savvy that? And keep your hand away from that gun, cowboy! You want to go on living, don't you?".

WHEELING his horse, Clay rode northward, disappearing into the brushy barrier. The Moon Bar hands had gotten the herd to milling, and now they clustered about Zene, those who had missed Clay's speech learning its import from others.

"We should have knowed," Happy Harkness opined dolefully. "When he didn't hit at us last night, it was because he had something dirtier up his sleeve. And this is it!"

"We could turn back," suggested Bonnie.

Zene shook his head. "And take a roundabout way to Ophir? We'd never make it before foreclosure date."

"Then . . . he's beaten us," Bonnie said slowly, her words echoing Zene's own thought.

Yet because the situation was so desperate, Zene's jaw set grimly. "Maybe he hasn't got us sewed up as tight as he thinks," he said. "Come along, Bill. Let's you and me take a little pasear and size up the situation."

Lanky Bill Gideon nudged his horse, flanking Zene as they cautiously approached the brushy barrier. It was the longest ride Zene ever took, for every minute he expected to hear the flat crash of a rifle. But they reached the brush unchallenged, proof that Martin Clay had withdrawn his men farther up the canyon.

Leaving their horses ground-anchored, the two wormed through the brush, moving warily lest a guard had been left behind, taking all of a half hour to inch through the barrier. Then they glimpsed the canyon ahead. The brush was thinner beyond, and the camp of Martin Clay sat close to the bank of Caprock River, tiny figures moving about it.

"At least two of 'em are across the river," Zene decided after a long squint. "Swimming the herd over and trying to flank them wouldn't work. While we made the move, they'd be putting their full force on the other bank to hunker in the bushes and pick us off."

"They've got us in a tight," Gideon conceded.

And Zene couldn't deny it. Studying the situation revealed no way of pushing past those who held the canyon.

"Come on, Bill," Zene said at last.

THUS they rode back to the herd with defeat as their saddlemate, rode back to report that the Moon Bar's cause was lost. But before Zene could have his say, Bonnie was running to him, clutching his arm excitedly.

"Zene!" she cried. "The Kid was here. He told us to hold the herd and not try anything desperate. He's going to clear the trail!"

"The Kid!" Zene echoed.

"He came while you were gone. He rode down from the other side of the river and swam his horse across. He's been up in Clay's camp."

"He told you *that?*"

"Yes," she said. "Don't you see, Zene? He's pretending to side Clay, but all the while he's working for us!"

"Pretending!" Zene said skeptically.

"You don't believe him, Zene? Oh, he knows what you think. He admitted he told Clay we'd be crossing the Furnace Flats. The Kid made Clay believe he'd slow down our drive so we'd never reach Ophir

in time. You see, the Kid figured that Clay would leave the drive alone if he thought the Kid was handling the job of stopping us. But Clay came along anyway and poisoned that waterhole. The Kid didn't know anything about that until you discovered the water was bad. The Kid managed to trail Clay that night and raised blazes about that piosoning job, pretending he was angry because he might have drunk the water himself. Clay gave him money and told him to string along with him."

"And what's our friend going to do now?" Zene asked scathingly.

"Clay's left his men to block the canyon and has gone on into Ophir. The Kid figures that if he can corral Clay alone, Clay's men won't stand and fight. Try to understand, Zene! The Kid's the only one of us who can pass through Clay's camp and into Ophir. But I hate to think of him forcing a showdown single-handed."

"He means something to you, Bonnie?" asked Zene.

"He . . . he kissed me before he left," she admitted. "But that isn't it, Zene. He's my friend and he was Hal's friend. But you don't believe him, do you?"

"I don't know what to believe," Zene admitted. "Maybe the Kid told it straight. Or maybe he spun a windy to keep us sitting here in the hopes that he'll do the chores. But if Clay's gone to Ophir, I've got to get there. If I can get my hands on him, he'll sing a different tune about blocking the canyon. But I've just looked over his camp and there's no way of getting past it!"

"No way!" Bonnie echoed. "Then the Kid will have to make his play alone."

"Wait!" Zene cried, inspiration in his eyes. "There's one chance—a mighty slim chance. But I'm going to take it!"

CHAPTER V

POWDER-SMOKE SHOWDOWN

SWIFT dusk was closing in on Caprock Canyon, and under the cloak of it Zene put the Moon Bar crew to work. There were axes in the chuck wagon, fetched along to provide firewood, so it was no trick to fell small trees and trim them of branches. When these light logs were lashed together with lariats, Bonnie's eyes widened in comprehension.

"A raft!" she cried. "You're going to float past Clay's camp!"

"Why not?" Zene asked. "Now that it's turning dark they'll be doubly alert, but they'll be expecting us to come in full force and try to sneak the herd through. I'll be on the raft with brush piled over me. The current will carry me downstream and this thing will look like so much driftwood. Clay's men won't be watching the river for one lone rannihan."

But lightly as he spoke, it was patent that he hadn't fooled Bonnie. "Zene," she said, her hand on his arm. "You'll be careful?"

And because there was a chance he might never return, Zene knew this was a moment that had been inevitable, a moment he'd dreaded since he'd ridden into Fadeaway—the moment when he must tell her the truth. So, sparing himself not at all, he poured out the story of what had happened in the Saskatoon Hills, telling her how her brother had died and why he, Zene, had come to take Hal's place. When he'd finished, Bonnie lifted her eyes to his.

"I wish I could say it didn't matter, Zene," she said slowly. "But

we'd remember the truth, both of us, and it would always be a shadow across our lives. Yet I'll never forget that you fought for the Moon Bar and that you told the truth when you might have kept silent. I . . . I wish it could be otherwise—"

There was nothing more to be said. The raft was ready, and Bonnie kissed him before he climbed aboard to stretch himself prone, the men piling brush upon him, then shoving the raft out into the river. The current caught the raft, spinning it about, and then it was rushing swiftly downstream, swept along by the turbulent river.

Through the brush Zene could glimpse the dark left bank of the river, the towering canyon walls. Now the grim gamble was beginning, for the campfire of Clay's men winked yonder. Another few minutes and he'd be well past it, out of danger. Then suddenly Zene realized the raft was slowing down. Some vagary of the current was pulling it shoreward, bumping it against the bank where it tangled among willows that crowded down into the water at this flood season.

To extricate the raft, he'd have to expose himself, and he slipped gingerly into the water, finding it almost hip deep. Ears strained, he heard no sound above the roar of the river. He was north of the enemy's campfire now, a region of comparative safety since Clay's crew would probably be patrolling south of this point. And when he saw a knot of picketed saddle horses huddled not far away, a new idea came to him.

Maybe those horses weren't guarded! With Clay's outfit reasoning that the danger lay to the south, they'd figure that the remuda was safe enough here. Stealing closer, Zene saw that the horses were saddled, reins trailing, and he understood why. Clay's crew might need those mounts in a hurry. Moving among the horses, he spoke softly, soothing them, fumbling at the picket rope of one. But just as he had it unknotted, a form loomed almost at his elbow, and Zene caught the flash of prominent white teeth in the darkness.

"That you, Trig?" a voice inquired guardedly.

"Sure," Zene said and let go with a looping right.

THE man went down, bounding to his feet again. But Zene wasn't waiting. Vaulting into the saddle, he zigzagged among the other horses as the man behind him unleathered a gun and began shooting. It was a ticklish moment, but Clay's man defeated his own purpose, for the gun's roar threw the horses into a panic, making them pitch and rear. Screened by horseflesh, Zene made his escape, thundering on up the canyon.

And now the walls were rushing past him, and the trail was clear to Ophir. There was speed in the stolen horse, and Zene drew upon it. Sometimes he reined short, listening intently, wondering if the big-toothed hombre had taken his trail. But always the voice of the river drowned out all else, and Zene forged onward, putting miles behind him.

A canopy of stars spread overhead, and the canyon was widening. Zene recognized landmarks, for this was his own Last Chance County, and he'd been in this section in the service of his badge. Yonder the trail should turn into Ophir Gulch, and it did, and thus, as midnight neared, Zene Ramsey saw the lights of the boom camp ahead—trail's end.

A gold strike had drawn men here, and overnight a town had sprung up,

the buildings, raw and undignified, following the windings of the gulch. Here was a town that never slept, and chaos was king at the roistering hour when Zene rode up the muddy street. Yellow light splashed from a dozen buildings, while bearded, rough-garbed men thronged the makeshift boardwalks. One saloon, larger than the others, bore a placard reading CABINS 4 RENT, and Zene dismounted, shouldering inside.

Fighting his way to the bar, he bought a drink, wincing at the boom-camp price he had to pay and leaving the whiskey untasted, for its purchase had been merely a design to gain the barkeep's ear.

"You seen a gent about my size tonight?" Zene asked. "He's plumb pretty from the right side, but he's got a bad scar on his left cheek."

"That jigger? You just missed him. He come in here a couple hours back and stood eying the door, watching every man that come in. And, brother, there was something in Scar-face's eye that would've curdled the devil's soul! Not more'n fifteen minutes back a fat gent walked in and Scar-face hailed him, said he wanted a palaver. The fat man said that likely his cabin would be a good place for talking, and the two of 'em left."

"His cabin?" Zene said eagerly. "Did the fat man rent a cabin from you? Where'll I find it?"

"You're in a powerful hurry," the barkeep opined. "Sure he rented from us. We got a mon-op-oly, savvy? He's in the last cabin at the west end."

That was all Zene needed to know, and he was instantly elbowing toward the door. He could understand why Clay had rented a cabin. Since his crew would undoubtedly hold Caprock Canyon till the date of the mortgage foreclosure, Clay was going to enjoy the comparative comforts of the boom camp meanwhile.

Coming up the gulch to that last cabin, Zene saw light splashing from its one window. But because there was still no proof that the Pondera Kid was friend instead of foe, he eased cautiously toward the window, acutely aware that there might be a showdown with the odds two to one. But when he raised his eyes above the sill, his last doubt was dispelled.

MARTIN CLAY cowered against the wall, his face pasty, his thick body quivering with fear. Across the room stood the Pondera Kid, a gun dangling in his hand. He was speaking slowly.

"And now maybe you savvy, Clay," the Kid was saying. "Like I've explained, I pretended to play your game in the hopes that you'd leave the stopping of the Moon Bar drive up to me alone. But you were too foxy for that. I could kill you for poisoning that waterhole, but that ain't the real reason I'm here. You murdered Bullhide Brackett. And you're the gent who's going to pay for that little piece of work—here and now!"

"It's a lie!" Clay quavered. "Bullhide made his brag that he had the mortgage money, and the whole range knew about it. Somebody looking for easy pickings beefed him! It wasn't my doings!"

"No?" the Kid said. "Have you forgotten that the money Bullhide packed came from that stage robbery up here in Last Chance? Have you forgotten that the bank marked that currency, figgering it might be lifted? Then tell me this, Clay: How come the money you paid me to do your dirty work was marked money? Sure, the man who killed Bullhide might have circulated the loot, and some of it might have got into your

wallet. But *all* the money you gave me was marked—which puts you in a split stick, mister!"

The Kid dropped his gun into his holster. "You've got a gun, Clay," he said. "I'm giving you a chance. Start your smoke!"

"No!" shrieked Clay. "Don't make me fight! Supposing I did beef Bullhide? Why should we fight over that, Kid? You're a lone wolf, Kid, out to make a dollar. That's your rep. I'll pay you—"

"You don't savvy!" the Kid said wonderingly. "Has this scar changed me so much? But of course you don't savvy. If you had, you'd never have been fooled into thinking I was stringing along with you. But take a good look at me, skunk, and start smoking!"

Martin Clay's eyes were going wide, and Zene, outside the window, was also beginning to understand the astounding truth. But in that instant the door across the room opened, and a man stepped inside—a man with prominent white teeth, the man who'd tried to stop Zene from stealing a horse at Clay's camp. He had approached the cabin so silently that Zene hadn't heard him. And that man, comprehending the setup, jabbed a gun into the Kid's back.

"I come to tell you that a Moon Bar galoot got through the canyon, boss," the fellow said. "Down at the saloon they told me where I'd find you. Looks like I come along just in time."

Zene smashed in the window with his gun barrel. "Sky 'em—both of you!" he barked. "Kid, I'm buying in on your side."

IT was the signal for hell to let loose. The man who had entered made the mistake of swiveling his gun away from the Kid, snapping a shot at Zene. But Zene's bullet drove the fellow backward, slamming him against the door where he slumped down, dead. At the same time Martin Clay clawed for his gun, getting in a shot at the Kid. But the Kid, swerving sideways, unleathered his own iron. And with the walls hurling back the echoes of .45s, Martin Clay clutched at his middle and pitched face forward.

"Come on!" Zene shouted. "We've got a job in Caprock Canyon. We've whittled down the odds, and if we hit the rest of Clay's crew from behind where they're not expecting it—"

The Kid nodded, and soon the two were mounted and heading for Caprock. There was a lot they might have said on that wild ride, but the breeze of their own making would have torn the words away. Thus they sped across the miles, roaring down Caprock toward Clay's camp in the first light of day. But bullets greeted them from the brush, snarling proof that Clay's men had seen them coming.

No time for planned strategy now. The sign said all of Clay's men were in that brushy barrier between Clay's camp and the Moon Bar herd. Throwing themselves from their horses, Zene and the Kid sought shelter behind rocks, pouring fire back at the renegades.

"The Moon Bar will hear the shots," Zene panted. "If they'll come now and attack those skunks from behind, we'll have 'em caught in a crossfire. But—"

"They're coming!" the Kid broke in. "Bonnie's savvied what's going on. Listen!"

For now, above the thunder of the river, there came a greater thunder, earth-shaking and ominous.

"Bless her!" he cried as something mighty crashed into the brush and

cries of panic rose from the renegades hunkered there. "She's found the way to turn the trick. She's stampeded the shorthorns down on Clay's crew!"

"Yonder they come," the Kid cried. "Ramsey, we'd better light a shuck for the river. Reckon you've already learned that it ain't safe to be around when them shorthorns get to running!"

They made a wild dash for the stream, no bullets buzzing to stop them, for Clay's outfit was in wild rout. And there, shoulder to shoulder in the water, the Kid said: "This is Last Chance County, ain't it? Did you fetch your badge along? If you stood outside Clay's cabin very long, you know the whole truth."

"I think I savvy," Zene admitted. "Now I can understand how you found the Moon Bar without asking in Fadeaway. And your hair's black, the same as Bonnie's. But if you've got a story to spill, I'm listening."

"Yes, I'm Hal Brackett," the scar-faced man said. "And me and Dutch Marsden stopped the Last Chance stage. But I didn't figger on Dutch killing the driver, and I was plumb sorry I threw in with him. I'd never have done it if I hadn't been so desperate for money."

"And the real Pondera Kid?" Zene prompted.

"He found me and Dutch up in the Saskatoons, just like I told you. But he was Dutch's friend, not mine, and a worthless skunk the Kid was. When you shot him and Dutch, I got the big idea, planted my wallet on the Kid and made a break for it. You see, the Kid had a bad rep, but at least he didn't have a murder charge hanging over him. Since he was dead, I was a little better off by switching identities with him."

"The law had no claim on the Kid," Zene admitted.

"I headed for the Moon Bar," the other went on. "Bonnie didn't know me, seeing as she was only five when I left, and since Bullhide was dead, I wasn't recognized. This scar, which I got a few years back, fooled Clay when I pretended to throw in with him, an idea I got when you mentioned his offerin' you double pay."

"I see," Zene said slowly. "I reckon it doesn't matter. Me, I've never figgered law was more important than justice, and neither does the Last Chance sheriff. I recovered most of the loot when I fetched in Dutch Marsden, and I think we'll find the rest of it among Clay's belongings in Fadeaway. I'm believing that Dutch killed the stage driver. When I write the sheriff, I think we'll be able to get the charges dropped against you."

"I'm thankin' you," the scar-faced man said huskily. "And I hope you savvy why I made you promise to leave Bonnie alone after the drive. You see, once she was in the clear, I figgered on telling her who I really was, then hiding out on the Moon Bar. But if a lawman was hanging around, I'd have to keep on deceiving her, pretending to be a skunk like the Pondera Kid."

"I'm turning in my badge," Zene said. "I aim to try cowpunching on the Moon Bar. That is, if Bonnie can use a hand."

"Looks like the herd's thinnin' out and the trouble's over. And here's Bonnie coming," Hal Brackett grinned. "After all, I've got some say about the Moon Bar. I'd be proud to sign you on as a brother-in-law, Zene. And I'm bettin' Bonnie doesn't raise a holler once she hears me out!"

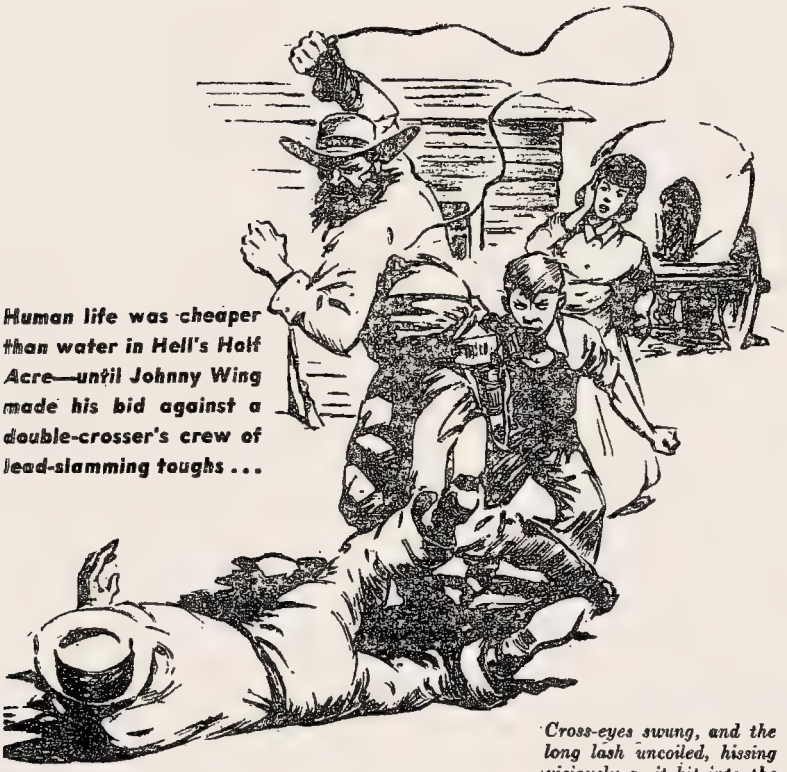
THE END

WATER FROM HADES

by GUNNISON STEELE

It was slightly past midmorning when Johnny Wing and his partner, Big Jorg Jorgenson, stopped their horses atop a rise in the desert and sat looking at the jumble of shacks a quarter mile below. Johnny Wing was slender, yellow-haired, resplendently dressed; Big Jorg, dressed in somber black, was powerful as a grizzly and unbelievably ugly.

"There she is," Johnny said, running his tongue over dry lips.



Human life was cheaper than water in Hell's Half Acre—until Johnny Wing made his bid against a double-crosser's crew of lead-slamming toughs . . .

Cross-eyes swung, and the long lash uncoiled, hissing viciously as it bit into the fallen man's back.

"Wherever there's houses and folks there's bound to be water."

"Mebbe," grunted Big Jorg.

"After last night's dry-camp my tonsils feel like a powder keg," Johnny went on. "Our broncs are dry, too. Looks like a town down there."

"Yeah," Big Jorg conceded.

They spoke to their horses, and a few minutes later rode among the score or more adobe and frame shacks that were sprawled without pattern over the bare landscape. There were three or four stores, a saloon, a blacksmith shop with hitch racks in front of them. But no water troughs or barrels were in sight.

Johnny Wing and Big Jorg reined in their horses, undecided. A garish sign across the front of the town's biggest building said: DESERT QUEEN SALOON, Silver Karnes, Prop. The smithy carried Silver Karnes' name, also one of the stores and a livery.

An arrow-shaped board nailed to a hitch rack, crudely labeled WATER, pointed toward a nest of rocky cliffs at the far edge of the shacks.

"Gent name of Silver Karnes seems to be the he-wolf here," Johnny murmured, as he and Big Jorg rode toward the cliffs.

Then they saw the water. Clear and cold, it seeped in a sizable trickle from a cleft in one of the walls twenty feet above the sand. There it was caught in a hollowed-out log and piped to within five feet of the earth where it could be caught in barrels. The waste water fell to the ground and flowed away in a shallow trench to an artificial waterhole two hundred feet away.

Big Jorg grunted, pointed, and Johnny Wing's mild blue eyes widened a little when he saw that a five-strand barbed-wire fence encircled the pool.

"Could I help you gents?"

JOHNNY and Big Jorg turned slowly and looked at the burly, cross-eyed, black-bearded hombre who had come from a shack close to the spring. The cross-eyed man held a rifle in one hand, and he wore a big six-shooter. He didn't move as Johnny and Big Jorg swung to the ground.

"You sure can, mister," Johnny said courteously. "That water looks mighty good."

"Is good," grunted Cross-eyes.

"Me and my pard are plumb dry. We'll just take a drink of that water, if you don't mind, then let our broncs drink from that pool yonder."

"Sure thing, stranger."

Johnny Wing stepped forward and reached for the tin cup that dangled by a chain from the hollow log pipe. The cross-eyed hombre spoke sharply.

"Just a minute, mister! Can't you read?" He gestured toward a board sign nailed to the side of the shack.

The sign said:

> Humans, four bits per drink. Horses, one dollar.
>
> Silver Karnes, Owner.

"In advance," Cross-eyes said.

Johnny lowered his hand, his brown face showing no emotion. "You mean, you charge folks for water?"

"What I mean. No pay, no water."

"Blasted buzzard!" Big Jorg growled, hand on gun butt.

Johnny nudged his homely pard warningly. "What's the name of this place, mister?" he asked.

"Knowed as Hell's Half Acre." Cross-eyes spat a stream of tobacco juice. "And no use tryin' to get tough. Silver Karnes filed on this water before there was any town here. I just work for him. You two

want some water, or not?"

"We wouldn't think of tryin' to get tough," Johnny Wing said softly. "How much for us and our horses, friend?"

"You crazy, kid?" Big Jorg blurted. "Let's salivate this stinkin' buzzard, and drink!"

"I do the salivatin' around here!" The burly hombre bristled, shifted the rifle muzzle. "Three dollars, for you two and the broncs. Pay up, or hightail it away from here!"

Big Jorg glowered and growled, unable to understand his partner's meekness. Cross-eyes watched suspiciously as Johnny unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a bulging money belt. Obviously, the belt held a great deal of money. Johnny extracted a ten-dollar bill, gave it to Cross-eyes and received some crumpled bills in return.

The water guard dropped his rifle butt to the ground. "Go ahead and drink," he grunted. "But don't try to take away any extra."

Johnny and Big Jorg drank deeply, savoring each drop of the cold, sweet water. "Rates are cheaper for reg'lar customers," said the burly man, grinning. "Mebbe you two'll want to stay here a spell."

Saying nothing, Johnny and his companion led their horses toward the pool nearby. As he opened the gate to the inclosure, Johnny saw a covered freight wagon, drawn by four mules, winding among the shacks toward the water. Johnny's sleek black and Big Jorg's rangy dun thrust their noses eagerly into the pool.

"Blasted robbers," grumbled Big Jorg.

"Worse," Johnny agreed. "Water is life in the desert. But peace is a wonderful thing, pard. And, like that whiskey buzzard said, we might want to linger hereabouts."

Big Jorg grunted. They let their horses drink a little at a time, aware of loud, bickering voices up at the spring. The freight wagon had halted before the shanty and the mules stood with drooping heads. A wiry, stooped man with a blacksnake whip in his hand stood talking with Cross-eyes. Inside the wagon Johnny could see a woman and a boy.

THE wiry man's angry voice came faintly: "I got to have water, I tell you. We're out, and it's twenty miles to Red Ledge. I'll send the money back when I get settled."

"You'll pay now, or you won't get a drop," Cross-eyes said flatly. "You knowed water cost money here, didn't you?"

"I ought to!" the man said bitterly. "Look, mister, I've had a lot of hard luck, I've got no money. Without water, for ourselves and the mules, we can't make it on to Red Ledge."

"That's too bad!"

"Just a drink for my wife and boy, then. Mebbe the mules can—"

"Not a drop, I said, unless you pay. Now get your two-bit outfit away from here, while you got the chance!"

Desperation on his haggard face, the wiry man lifted the whip threateningly. The boy, a freckled, tow-headed button of about ten, clambered hastily to the ground. Cross-eyes' rifle leaned against the shack thirty feet away; he stood with thick shoulders hunched forward truculently.

The woman spoke pleadingly from the wagon seat: "Please, John, don't use any trouble. We'll get by, somehow."

But the stooped man had been goaded too far. He brought the keen-lashed whip down swishingly

across Cross-eyes' shoulders. The water guard cursed with pain and rage, grabbed at the whip, caught the lash and jerked savagely. The powerful tug sent the little man sprawling on his face, the whip jerked from his hand.

Cross-eyes shifted ends with the whip, his thick fingers gripping the heavy butt. "I'll teach you to start trouble!" he snarled. "I'll cut you to pieces!"

The long lash uncoiled, hissing and snarling viciously. It bit at the fallen man's back and he groaned and rolled over, arms upflung to protect his face as he tried to get to his feet. But Cross-eyes knew how to use the whip. It flicked and stabbed and curled, ripping the man's clothes like a knife blade.

The freckled button yelled, "Quit hurtin' my daddy, dang you!" and flew with flailing fists at the water guard.

One of Cross-eyes' big hands arced, smacked solidly against the boy's face, hurling him a good twenty feet across the sand. He lay there a moment, stunned, bewildered.

The wiry man had risen to his knees. He swayed there, clawing at the whip that tormented him. But the big hombre was relentless. Grinning coldly, ignoring the screams of the woman, he went deliberately about carrying out his threat to cut the freighter to pieces.

Then, suddenly, Cross-eyes staggered as though a poleax had hit him. The whip was snatched from his hand. He heard its hissing snarl, felt its fiery bite into his chest. He bellowed with pain and charged, fists hammering.

Tossing the whip aside, Big Jorg met Cross-eyes' rush head-on, and it was like the clash of two bulls. But Cross-eyes was no match for the big, ugly-looking hombre. Deliberately, without mercy, Big Jorg hammered the water guard's face to a pulp, then smashed him to the ground with a last savage blow.

A dozen men had come running from the shacks to see the fight. One, a hard-eyed, gun-belted man, started to rush into the battle.

Johnny Wing, who had been standing calmly aside, said coldly: "I wouldn't, friend!"

The hard-eyed hombre looked at Johnny, at the ivory-handled gun in his hand, and backed away.

Cross-eyes got slowly to his feet, all the fight gone out of him. "You wallopers'll pay for this," he whined. "Wait till Silver Karnes—"

Big Jorg spat, "Shut up!" and Cross-eyes wilted.

BOTH the wiry man and the boy had got to their feet. Neither was badly hurt. The woman, young, work-worn but still pretty, had got down from the wagon. The spectators watched, saying nothing.

Johnny took the crumpled bills from his pocket and tossed them at the beaten water guard's feet, then said to the three from the freight wagon: "Drink up—take all you want. Then unhook your mules and water 'em from that pool."

"We'll repay you two, sometime, some way," the woman promised.

The button felt Big Jorg's huge arm. "Gee, mister," he said with awe, "I bet you're the strongest man alive!" Big Jorg scowled, then grinned.

Johnny and Big Jorg watched as the three drank. Cross-eyes and the buck-toothed hombre who had tried to mix in the fight drew aside and talked in whispers. The spectators melted away; it was hard to tell whether they were friendly or hostile.

After watering the mules at the pool, the wiry man, who said his name was John Dawson, hooked them to the wagon again. Johnny had seen that in the wagon, in addition to a few household effects, there was a water barrel. At the bottom of the sign nailed to the shack, in small letters, were the words: REGLAR CUSTOMERS—$1 A BARREL.

"Reckon you folks might be called customers now," Johnny said. "Fill up!" He gave Cross-eyes another dollar.

Dawson drove under the lower end of the hollow log pipe and filled his water barrel. "We drove most of the night to get here," he said. "So we're stoppin' a while over yonder at them cottonwoods before we drive on. We got plenty grub for you two, if you'll come along."

Johnny Wing and Big Jorg got on their horses and rode beside the wagon to a clump of cottonwoods bordering a dry wash about a quarter of a mile away. Johnny's curiosity, as well as his anger, was aroused. In the cool shade they made camp, and the woman cooked a savory, if meager, meal.

SILVER KARNES, Dawson explained, controlled Hell's Half Acre—because he controlled the water. Karnes claimed he had the spring leased, though nobody had ever seen the lease. His authority was mostly his guns, and those of the four tough hombres he had on his pay roll, one of whom was the cross-eyed water guard. Karnes was, among other things, a card shark. He owned the Desert Queen, the town's only saloon and gambling hall.

"He's let a few others settle here, just so he can sell 'em water," Dawson said. "There're a couple of scattered ranches, and he sells drinkin' water to them, too. It comes higher to strangers passin' through. Many a time I've seen that crew send men stumblin' with thirst on down the trail, because they didn't have the money to pay. I'm afraid you fellers have bought some bad trouble, if you don't ride on quick."

"Ain't there any law hereabouts?" Johnny asked.

"County seat's forty miles away, over the mountains. Likely the sheriff gets a rake-off from Karnes. Anyway, he never comes here. Karnes is all the law there is. Honest folks hate him, but they're afraid of him, too. They pay whatever he asks."

John Dawson, it developed, had tried to make a go of a little cattle ranch thirty miles to the east. But for two years rustlers had kept him stolen blind. Finally, all his cattle gone, out of pure snake-meanness the thieves had poisoned his one waterhole. He had had to take his wife and young son and pull out then, hastily, without water, admitting final defeat. Now they were headed for a more hospitable section to start anew.

Silver Karnes, Dawson stated flatly, was the skunk who had driven him out. But there was nothing he could do about it.

Through eating, Johnny Wing got to his feet. "So this Silver Karnes is a poker wolf, besides bein' a cross between a hydrophobia skunk and a sidewinder," he said. "Where can I find him?"

"Likely at the Desert Queen." Dawson looked worried. "You goin' down there?"

"Just for a friendly little visit." Johnny grinned. "Mebbe this big ox'll want to apologize for beatin' up that guard."

Big Jorg scowled, grunted. The big hombre talked little, but he was

strong as a bear and fast with the six-shooter he wore. He and Johnny Wing swung into their saddles.

Johnny said, "Good luck, folks," and they rode toward the jumble of shacks.

They dismounted before the Desert Queen and went inside. Half a dozen men, besides the bald, raillike bartender, were in the big room. A three-handed poker game was going at the back of the place. The money on the table showed that the game was for low stakes.

Johnny and Big Jorg went to the rough-pine bar and ordered drinks. Whiskey, they found, was cheaper than water. Johnny turned, glass in hand, looking casually at the poker players. Two of them looked like ordinary ranchers or cowboys. The third, from Dawson's description, was Silver Karnes.

Silver Karnes was a gaunt, red-haired man, darkly dressed, with ruthless power and greed stamped indelibly on his cruel hawkish features. His cougar-yellow eyes took in Johnny and Big Jorg as they entered the room. Karnes sat with his back to the wall, so that no spectators could get behind him. The blocky, buck-toothed gunman who had tried to come to the water guard's aid leaned against the wall at Karnes' shoulder.

Karnes spoke to the blocky man, got up and came toward the bar. The blocky hombre dropped into Karnes' chair. Karnes stopped beside Johnny Wing and Big Jorg. His smile seemed friendly, but his eyes were cold, like golden agates.

"I'm Karnes," he said smoothly. "You're the gents who had a run-in with my man at the spring a little while ago, aren't you?"

Big Jorg was frowning darkly, fingering his gun butt. Johnny kicked him on the shin and said: "That's right. Bein' strangers, we didn't sabe just how things are run here."

"Forget it." Karnes smiled broadly. "Matson goes off half-cocked sometimes. To show there's no hard feelings, both of you have a drink on the house."

Johnny nodded, and the barkeep set out a bottle. Karnes' affability didn't fool Johnny Wing. Karnes, naturally, would have heard about the stuffed money belt around Johnny's slim waist.

OVER their drink Karnes asked casually: "You gents just passin' through, you say?"

"Lookin' for a place to settle," Johnny said. "We aim to buy us a ranch, if we can find the right kind."

"Plenty good cattle land not far from here," Karnes told him. Johnny knew he was lying; this was desolate country, for the most part.

They talked a moment, pleasantly, and then Johnny Wing asked: "That poker you fellers was playin' over there?"

Karnes smiled. "Just a friendly little game. Like to take a hand?"

"I got some time to kill. Course I don't sabe the game much, but mebbe I could learn."

"There ain't no experts here," Silver Karnes assured him.

They crossed to the table, Big Jorg clumping along silently. The spectators looked at one another, shrugging at the sight of another sucker led to the slaughter. The buck-toothed hombre relinquished his chair to Karnes. Johnny pulled up another chair, and Big Jorg took up a position behind him.

Unbuttoning his shirt, Johnny took possibly a hundred dollars from the money belt. Karnes feigned indifference, but Johnny didn't miss the quick gleam of greedy triumph

in his yellow eyes as he saw the well-filled belt.

The game was draw. The betting was slow, at first, while each player felt the others out. The two ranchers were cautious, suspicious. At first they'd had only Silver Karnes to watch. But now they were wary of calm, yellow-haired Johnny Wing and the ugly giant standing silently behind him.

As Johnny won several pots, and the betting rose sharply, the ranchers dropped out of the game, leaving Silver Karnes and Johnny Wing to face each other across the polished table top. An hour passed, and now Karnes wasn't smiling. He sat with gaunt body hunched low in his chair and a black cigar clamped between his teeth. His movements were smooth, deft, but some of the eager triumph had left his cougar eyes.

By now he knew he hadn't hooked just another sucker. Johnny Wing had five hundred dollars of his money on his side of the table. Johnny was calm-eyed, his slender fingers quick, expert, matching in smooth deftness those of Silver Karnes.

A SCORE or more men were in the room now. The spectators watched, still-faced, silent. Two other gun-belted hombres had taken their places beside the buck-toothed hard case who flanked Karnes—a dark-faced runt and a muddy-eyed, slablike man. These three, along with the water guard, were the four gunmen Dawson had mentioned.

Facing them was Big Jorg, scowling, silent, like a huge watchdog. Big Jorg knew what was about to happen; they didn't.

Another hour passed, with Johnny continuing to win steadily.

Karnes had dealt. He shoved a stack of chips to the center. "A hundred's the bet," he said.

Johnny Wing squinted thoughtfully at his cards, folded them, nudged twin stacks to the center. "Just half enough, friend," he said apologetically.

Karnes' cold eyes probed. He called. Cards flipped over. The tinhorn's curse was quickly smothered as Johnny calmly raked in the pot.

Three hands later, Karnes peeked at his cards and frowned. "These ain't so good," he muttered.

"These," Johnny said quickly, "are worth a couple of hundred."

Karnes faked another peek at his hand. "Must have misread my hand," he purred. "Your two hundred, and a couple more!"

Johnny grinned. "These look better all the time. Would four hundred more be too much?"

Karnes' jaw set and a sinister gleam came into his eyes. Suddenly he realized he had met his match and was being beaten at his own crooked game. With a quick motion he threw his hand into the discards.

Grinning again, Johnny spread his hand face up on the table. Four hearts and a club—a busted flush! Karnes remembered the ten-high straight he'd thrown away, and a snarl lifted the corners of his lips.

Half an hour later, Karnes shoved back his chair and said harshly: "That cleans me. Took all the cash I've got here. I've got money in a Tombstone bank. I'll let you cash me a check."

Johnny shook his head. "No checks. If you're out o' cash money, reckon the game's over."

"You've got four thousand of my money. You mean, you ain't givin' me a chance to get even?"

"Well, now," Johnny said slowly, "can't nobody say I'm not a sport. I'll make you a proposition. You claim to hold a lease on the spring

and waterhole out yonder, don't you?"

"So what?"

"So I'll play you the four thousand dollars I'm winner, against that lease. Take it or leave it!"

The room was very quiet. Silver Karnes' lips clamped tighter about his dead cigar. The three gunmen were hunched a little forward, like coiled rattlers, looking expectantly at Karnes. The spectators had backed away from the table. But now the wiry, stooped figure of John Dawson stood beside Big Jorg. In Dawson's holster was a long-barreled six-shooter.

Johnny could read the silent order Silver Karnes gave as he glanced up at his henchmen. If Johnny won, he was not to leave this room alive.

Karnes got up abruptly and went to a big iron safe behind the bar. Opening the safe, he took from it a folded piece of paper, returned and slapped the paper on the table top. Johnny took a quick glance at the paper and saw that it was a lease—whether real or faked, he couldn't tell. And it didn't matter.

"I'll just take you up, mister," Karnes sneered. "Your luck—if it is luck—is bound to change. I'll strip you down to your hide!"

"Talk won't do it," Johnny said curtly.

Johnny placed four thousand dollars in the center of the table beside the lease. They played with chips now, each player starting with an equal amount representing four thousand dollars. The room was quiet, tense.

EACH man in the room knew the odds smooth-faced Johnny Wing was bucking. Now Silver Karnes would pull every cunning trick he knew from the bag. And if Johnny still won, the chances of his leaving the room alive were slight.

And Johnny continued to win.

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Gradually Karnes' stack of chips dwindled and Johnny's grew.

The ugly, desperate light deepened in the tinhorn's eyes. He lapsed into sullen silence, broken only by sullen, snarling curses as he lost pot after pot.

Johnny Wing played smoothly, deliberately, stripping the arrogant boss of Hell's Acre without mercy. He knew that Karnes was cheating. He saw cleverly palmed cards slide into Karnes' poker hand; saw deft fingers flick cards lightninglike from the bottom of the deck. But he gave no sign.

Deliberately he goaded the town boss into a rage. Time after time he bluffed on nothing—and turned his cards face up for Karnes to see. Time and again he barely topped Karnes on hands that to the tinhorn must have looked like cinches.

Karnes was like a snapping wolf in his baffled rage. Rivulets of sweat ran unheeded over his cruel hawkish face. In his eyes was the certainty that he would have to kill Johnny Wing.

The sun was painting the desert with red and purple and gold when Johnny won the last of Karnes' chips.

"You're crooked as a bar'l of eels, tinhorn, but not halfway good," Johnny sneered. "You ought to be playin' mumble peg with the kids!"

Karnes' fury came to a boil. Head hunched forward like a coiled rattler, he squalled, "Take 'em, you buckos!" and grabbed for his silver-handled gun.

Fast, that cougar-eyed tinhorn—but not quite fast enough, for Johnny Wing had guessed what would happen. Snarling gun thunder beat back from the walls of the room, and powder smoke boiled as Johnny's ivory-handled six-shooter spouted lead and flame across the table top.

Silver Karnes seemed to break in the middle. Abruptly he slumped across the table and rolled to the floor, his unfired gun still in his hand.

Boots scuffled wildly as the spectators sought shelter. But the shooting was over. Karnes' three gunmen, caught off balance by the suddenness of what had happened, let a second pass before grabbing for their guns. By then a pair of black .45s in Big Jorg's huge hands had them covered.

"Blasted buzzards!" Big Jorg growled wrathfully. "Go on, move. Just a little bit!"

But the gunmen stood very still, all the fight seemingly gone out of them at sight of their dead boss. They offered no resistance as Johnny stepped forward and lifted their six-

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guns from their holsters.

"You hombres are through here," Johnny told them flatly. "When the sun goes down you'd better be out of Hell's Half Acre. Get out, and don't come back. And take your cross-eyed pal with you as you pass the spring!"

THE three gunmen looked at Johnny and Big Jorg, at the grim, hostile faces all about them—and strode hastily from the room. A few minutes later they, accompanied by Cross-eyes, rode at a gallop into the desert.

Johnny Wing took the money and the folded piece of paper from the table. He looked at the still-faced men in the room and said: "Hell's Half Acre has got a new boss, friends. As of right now, new water rates will apply to all. After you've buried the deceased, come up to the spring and we'll get acquainted."

He motioned to Big Jorg and Dawson, and they turned and left the saloon, going along a weed-grown path to the cliffs.

The score and a half of men buried Silver Karnes on a rise back of Hell's Acre. The burial, completed without ceremony or regret, required perhaps thirty minutes. Then, still grim-faced, they went in a body to the spring. On each of their lips was the question of whether the price of water would go up or down.

Johnny Wing and Big Jorg, along with John Dawson and his wife and boy, stood before the shanty. As usual, Big Jorg looked morose, but the woman and button were smiling broadly.

One of the men, as they approached the spring, nudged his neighbor and pointed. Puzzlement overspread their faces as they looked at the waterhole. The encircling barb wire had been cut, dragged away!

Johnny took a folded piece of paper from his pocket, tore it into tiny bits and let them fall to the ground.

"Karnes' lease on this water has expired," he said. "As I said, new rates have gone into effect—the same to all!" He pointed to the freshly painted sign on the side of the cabin.

The sign said: FREE!

Slowly, unbelief gave way to wide grins among the grouped men. A yell went up, and they crowded about Johnny and Big Jorg, asking questions and trying to shake hands. Big Jorg fidgeted, growled, scowled—and finally grinned with the rest.

"Water wasn't never meant to be sold," Johnny told them. "So drink hearty, and fill up your barrels. And remember, it's not on me, but on the Big Boss up yonder!"

John Dawson touched the arms of his wife and son. "Reckon we'd better get started," he said. "By drivin' all night we'll get back to the ranch by noon tomorrow." He didn't mention that Johnny Wing had insisted on "loaning" him a thousand dollars to get started again. Straight and proud, confident of the future, the three Dawsons turned and went toward their wagon.

"How about you two gents?" somebody asked. "You aim to settle here?"

Johnny Wing shook his head.

"Me, I put in four years travelin' with the country's biggest circus, doin' card tricks." He grinned. "My pardner, here, he was billed as the world's ugliest man. We got homesick one night and lined out in the middle of a performance. We're just a couple of saddle bums, and we'll be ridin' on!"

THE END

With a yell, Tod leaped aboard the "Blue Diamond," followed by Jib and the Scotsmen, and the fight was on.

GUN WOLVES OF THE GOLD COAST

by ED MOORE

Tod Rand knew, when he rode off to collect his strange inheritance, that there would be a gun-smoke payoff at the end of the trail

THE letter finally caught up with Tod Rand at the Flying W. The letter carried as strange a message as a man born to boots and saddle ever received. But as old Jeb Willis, owner of the Flying W, said when he brought the letter out from town, Tod might have shrugged away his strange bequest and forgotten it had that been all.

That wasn't all. The letter carried a warning—and a hidden

threat. And San Francisco itself was a challenge.

Tod was at the corral when Jeb drove up in the buckboard and handed over the letter. Tod thoughtfully examined the envelope. The letter was several months old. It had been sent from San Francisco to Texas, and from there had started its arduous trek back westward.

As Tod began to read the message, Jeb had a premonition of coming trouble. Jeb would have preferred to lose a hundred head of prime stock to losing his foreman. Tod had ridden in three years back and asked for a job. Inside of a year he was rodding the spread.

The Flying W had prospered as never before. Cool, competent, possessed of a driving power tempered by an easygoing manner, Tod had a way with stock and men.

Jeb had never seen Tod mad but twice—both times after rustling raids on the Flying W. They were times to remember. When the crew had overtaken the rustlers, Tod hadn't waited for help. Driven by a rash temper he'd slammed straight into the rustler camps. Those fights had made history on the Rock River range and there was awe in men's voices when they spoke of Tod's gunwork. Jeb Willis himself had never seen anything to equal it, and for a man who'd spent more than sixty years growing up with the West that was saying something.

Tod looked up from the letter and said mildly, "Well, what d'you know?"

"Not a dang thing," Jeb said testily. "How the hell could I?"

"I've been willed a schooner," Tod remarked.

"Is that all?" Jeb snorted. "Go over to town and the blacksmith will give you a schooner just to have it hauled away from his back door."

"I don't mean a prairie schooner. I mean a boat that floats and has sails and all that sort of harness."

"Huh?" Jeb was too surprised to say more.

"Funny how things work out," Tod continued. "A few years back I went through the worst drought that ever hit south Texas. I got to thinkin' what it would be like to see an ocean, acres and acres of water all in one batch. It got so bad I saddled up one day and rode out. My place was burnt to a cinder anyhow. I rode five hundred miles to Galveston.

"Well, I saw my ocean, and it was a mess of water. I rode my horse right off the docks and we soaked up about forty gallons apiece. But that doggoned water, the whole ocean full of it, was salty as a cow lick."

"The hell!" Jeb exclaimed. "If it's too salty for cows to drink, what good is it to anybody?"

"None that I could see. So I stopped by a place to wash the salt taste out of my mouth with a little bourbon. A fight from who laid the chunk broke out in that place. Ten seagoin' hands jumped a hombre that owned a boat. He was plenty of man, this hombre, and was doin' all right so I didn't butt in. Not till those ten sidewinders started pullin' knives. I didn't figure that was plumb on the level so I—well, I sort of lent that one fellow a hand."

"Sort of, huh?" Jed interrupted sarcastically. "I can see you 'sort of lendin' a hand when you go on the prod with a couple of swingin' gun barrels."

"I got that boat boss out of there but he was some cut up so I looked after him a few days. When he came around he asked my name and where I lived. Didn't so much as

say much oblige, just rolled his soogans and shoved off. I never heard from him again."

"That letter from him?"

"Well, no," Tod said. "It's from a lawyer in San Francisco. Seems this hombre I sort of lent a hand to has cashed his chips in Frisco. This lawyer says the fellow willed his schooner to me." Tod regarded the letter speculatively. "The lawyer says it's a prime schooner, the best one in the harbor."

JEB snorted. "What if it is? What can you do with it? You can't put a saddle on it, you can't hitch it to a wagon, you can't use it for a brandin' corral—"

"Maybe I can sell it," Tod broke in thoughtfully. "I might get enough to take up that land next to yores and put a little stock on it."

"I've told you I'd buy that land and stock it for you," Jeb said in an aggravated tone that indicated this was an old argument, "if you'll go on roddin' yore place and mine together."

"I'm obliged, Jeb, but you know I'd rather swing it myself. This looks like my chance—and I aim to keep roddin' yore spread long as you want me."

"All right, if you just got to be hardheaded. Write that lawyer fellow to sell yore seagoin' buckboard."

"Seems there's a little more to it," Tod said. "This lawyer has got a pardner who slipped a note on the bottom of the letter. He says: 'My partner presents only the legal aspects of a case to a client, which of course is as far as his duty goes. But for the client's welfare, my conscience compels me to tell the client the whole situation in regard to a case. Unfortunately, San Francisco is a wild, turbulent place in which the law and the courts are well-nigh powerless. Might rules and the result is uncontrolled violence. Murder is commonplace and there are sinister forces at work here. Legally, you own the schooner *Blue Diamond*, but legality counts for little in San Francisco. It is my studied opinion that you would do well to forget the whole matter.'"

Tod looked up. His eyes were smoky and there was latent violence in the set of his shoulders. In a dangerously soft drawl, he said, "You reckon, Jeb, there's somebody out in San Francisco that don't want me to take what's rightly mine?"

"If there was a hundred somebodies, wouldn't be any holdin' you now," Jeb said disgustedly. "All right, how long you reckon it'll take you to get back from Frisco? That is—*if* you get back."

CHAPTER II

CITY OF DEATH

TOD was less than a day's ride out of San Francisco when he first met Bruce MacGregor and his outfit. Night had fallen an hour earlier but Tod had kept riding because he was out of grub and hoped to run across some hospitable camp on the trail.

A leaping campfire lifted his hopes and he turned his horse toward it. The sound of his coming was heard at the camp, for shadows moved swiftly about the fire, then became stationary in an attitude of wary waiting.

Tod rode into the circle of light before pulling in his horse. Twenty-odd big, deep-chested miners stood in a loose semicircle regarding him. Their attitude was not exactly hostile but it was definitely cautious. Tod centered his attention on a man who stood forward of the others and

was obviously the leader. He was a giant chestnut-bearded man somewhere in his early forties. His keen blue eyes appraised Tod carefully and it was a full minute before he seemed satisfied. Then he lifted a careless hand.

"Howdy, stranger," the giant said in a booming voice. "If you're from close around, you know Bruce MacGregor—if you've come far, I'm him."

"Howdy," Tod said quietly. "My range is quite a way off. Over there I'm called Tod Rand."

"Get down, Rand, and make yourself to home." MacGregor inclined his head toward the others. "We're known in Frisco and the gold fields as the MacGregor Clan. If you're hungry, there's some chow left."

"I'm hungry enough to eat mutton."

Tod stepped out of the saddle and nodded in a friendly way to the group of Scots miners—brawny, stalwart men who could pull their weight anywhere. They inclined their heads without speaking. A stranger was welcome enough if he appeared to be all right, but final judgment was reserved until such time as the newcomer should prove himself.

Tod went over and dished himself up some food. Bruce MacGregor casually dropped down beside him and the others settled down at their ease, but all had Tod within range of their vision. Tod ate slowly, listening to the talk of the outspoken, independent Scotsmen. They were his sort of men and he liked them instinctively. He gathered from the casual conversation that the MacGregor Clan was quite well known in the gold country.

"You men on yore way to Frisco, MacGregor?" Tod asked.

"Aye, lad, we are. A man stays in the gold fields so long, then he needs a bit of fun. Every so often we go to the city for a fling and the city knows it when we drop in. We stick together, have our fun together—and never more than half o' us sleep at a time."

"I hear Frisco's a mite tough."

"It's the devil's own playground, Rand." MacGregor's face darkened. "Every man of us is wearin' a belt stuffed with dust. Our lives wouldn't be worth a pile o' tailin's was we to travel alone, or even in twos and threes. But old Nick himself wouldn't tackle the MacGregor Clan when it was together. And old Nick is on the loose in Frisco with as dirty a pack o' black angels as ever split-hoofed their way out o' the sinks o' perdition. There are dark, sinister doin's in that hell-spawned city. What takes a cowman there?"

"Me?" Tod said. "I got business in Frisco. Hope to turn a little profit in a deal with the *Blue Diamond*, a—"

Tod got no further. The MacGregor Clan reared up as one man. The faces of the men were tight with hostility—and everyone of them had a gun in his hand. Tod glanced around in amazement at the twenty-odd guns lined on him. At last he brought his astonished gaze back to the glowering face of the leader of the group.

"You eat the bread of honest men while your black heart laughs, no doubt," MacGregor growled. "I might've known from the set of your guns you'd be lookin' for profit in a deal with the *Blue Diamond*. It's a rope for the likes o' you."

A menacing growl of approval came from the men, while stubborn anger built swiftly in Tod. He got to his feet, his arms hanging loosely.

"Maybe you think a rope would

be easy after twenty men have made sneak draws," he drawled contemptuously. "You'll find out different. Come ahead when you're ready."

MacGregor thought a moment, then shook his head. "Nobody can say the MacGregors ain't just even to a blackhearted dog ready to sell his soul for profit. You say we took you unawares. All right, get on your horse and ride out o' here fast. But be ready next time. If we meet in Frisco the MacGregor Clan will blast you on sight the same as we'd tromp a snake."

"Maybe," Tod said, "if you'd just tell me what—"

"Climb on that horse and ride!" MacGregor thundered.

Tod stood a long moment. At last he nodded. "You hold the cards this trick," he said tightly. "All right, mister, I'll ride. But I don't like to be shoved around. Just to make sure you find me in Frisco, I'll make it a point to look you up."

THE next afternoon Tod reached a hill from which he could look down on the fabulous city which had mushroomed up on the sands of the Gold Coast. Tod reined in and rolled a cigarette.

All day the incident of the previous night had kept him in a savage humor. He didn't like the names he'd been called—mostly he didn't like something he couldn't understand. He hadn't the faintest idea what had changed the Scots miners from amiable, easygoing companions into an angry, menacing group of tough hands ready for a hanging. Mere mention of his schooner had seemed to gain him a corralful of hard-bitten enemies who would be bad trouble in a tight. But Tod was stubborn and he meant to find out what had sent the MacGregor Clan on the prod.

Momentarily he put the problem out of his mind as he looked down on San Francisco.

It was not a pretty sight but it was a stirring one. The center of town was composed of sprawling wooden buildings, some plain, some gaudy, some old and weather-beaten, some raw with unseasoned lumber. Surrounding the core of the city, countless tents spread haphazardly in every direction.

The streets of the town seethed with motion. The boardwalks were choked with humanity which seemed to ebb and flow in no purposeful pattern. From a distance the streets looked like gigantic serpents which lifted and shifted and writhed but went nowhere. Thousands of voices blended into a heavy roar which was exciting and at the same time portentous.

Tod looked beyond to the harbor where the sun sparkled on blue water. There was no life there and the sparkling water rippled under a blight. Half a hundred ships lay at anchor, deserted, forlorn, slowly rotting. Their naked masts heightened the sense of bleak desolation. The harbor was a graveyard which cast a shadow over the city, a shadow heavy with evil decadence.

This then was San Francisco, center of the Argonauts, a vital city of superb but uncontrolled strength out of which sprang such violence that death and decay might well lay it waste.

Tod looked again at the harbor. Somewhere out there he owned a piece of property which had fired his hopes for things long wanted. He had scarcely expected to find he owned a headstone—even a new, shiny headstone—in a graveyard. A sense of foreboding stole over him. But Tod was not of a breed of men

who turned back. He rode on.

By the time he reached San Francisco, a thin haze had drifted in from the sea to settle over the city. At first it was light and feathery with bright sunlight shining through it. But the feathery haze was only a forerunner of the thick rolling fog which would soon blot out everything more than a few feet in front of a man's nose.

Tod found a place to stable his horse, then stopped by a restaurant for a quick meal. A sense of urgency caused him to eat fast. When he paid his bill he learned there were plenty of ways to corral a hatful of gold in San Francisco besides digging it out of the ground. Even after the restaurant owner gratuitously threw in directions to the office of Tod's lawyer, Tod felt he had paid ten times the price of his meal.

He joined the shoving throngs on the boardwalk and moved toward the center of town. The crowds seemed to be thinning fast and there was a hurried purpose to their movements. Tod watched the multitude. For the most part it was made up of miners in town on a spree or new arrivals getting ready to go to the fields, but in a single block every type of human being in the world could be found. Tod quickly sensed uneasiness in the throng. Men watched the thickening fog and hurried their footsteps. It seemed that they all wanted to get somewhere before the gray blanket smothered the city so neither man nor devil could be seen. Tod soon realized that the uneasiness evident in the throng was rooted in fear and he wondered.

AS he crossed the plaza, Tod saw ahead of him a big gambling palace and saloon. The building was painted a noisy green and across its front was a row of shamrocks, alternately three and four-leaved.

Tod stopped and muttered, "Now, I wonder. Shucks, there couldn't be two just like that in the world. Frisco, I got a hunch the lid will blow off this night."

Tod carefully marked the location of the garish saloon so he could find his way back to it, and hurried on. Three blocks away he found the building for which he was looking and went in. It was a two-storied structure and an arrow marked Dougherty & Raiford, Lawyers, pointed up the stairs.

It was dark in the entrance hall; the stairwell was even gloomier. Tod started up and as he approached the middle landing he heard a heavy tread above him. A burly figure swung into view and with a ruthless thrust of his shoulder almost sent Tod sprawling down the steps.

Tod caught himself and a quick rush of anger tightened his face. He looked at the man above him on the stairs and said, "Maybe that was an accident, mister. If it was I'd like to hear you say so."

The burly stranger guffawed loudly, showing snaggled teeth in his flattened, pockmarked face. He was a hideous-looking man and the suggestion of cold evil about him was heightened by the curved hook which served for a left hand. That hook was honed keen as a razor.

"Men from this part o' the country, cow rassler," he said, "get out of the way o' Hook Kinard."

"I'm not from this part of the country," Tod drawled.

His hands shot out and caught both of Kinard's boots. He gave a hard jerk, then leaped aside. Kinard shot down the steps and was halfway to the bottom before he caught himself. He lunged to his feet, a killing rage twisting his face, and

started up the stairs with the steel hook held before him. A cold chill ran up Tod's spine as he watched that deadly weapon. His hand dropped to his gun.

Hook Kinard seemed oblivious to the threat of a gun. His eyes glittered madly as he rushed to get in close enough to rip Tod to ribbons with the hook. He was almost within reach when Tod whipped out his weapon. At that moment a third party cut in on the scene.

Above on the landing at Tod's back, a deep voice said, "That's no way to greet a stranger to San Francisco, Hook. Quit it."

Tod couldn't look around. He didn't dare take his eyes off the kill-crazy man below him. Kinard looked up at the landing for a long moment, then the madness slowly died in his eyes. But there was still naked hate in the glance he turned on Tod.

"I'll get you, feller," he hissed viciously. "Ain't enough fog in the world to hide you."

"Any time you think you can," Tod answered levelly. "But I'm warning you. Come at me with that steel hook and I aim to use a gun."

"I can outgun you any day," Hook swore. "I aim to shoot the gun out o' yore hand, then rip yore guts out."

He turned and lumbered down the stairs.

NOT until he had passed through the hall and out into the street did Tod turn. On the landing a middle-aged man dressed in claw-hammer coat and striped trousers stood quietly. At first glance his white face gave an impression of tired indifference approaching boredom. But his coal-black eyes belied the expression; they were keenly alive and penetrating.

"Kinard has killed men with that hook," the stranger said. "He might have killed you."

"Might have," Tod answered briefly.

The black eyes regarded Tod thoughtfully. After a moment the man continued, "Or you might have killed him. Either way, it would have been bad. There's too much killing in San Francisco."

"Why doesn't somebody put a stop to it?"

"Men are afraid. I'm doing my best to get the law-abiding citizens organized. But—well, I don't suppose I can blame them for being afraid. Those who have made an effort to establish law and order have —met with accidents."

"What about you?"

"There have been a half dozen attempts on my life. So far I've been lucky."

Tod cocked his head. "A real good gun marshal ought to be able to do a little good."

"Such as—you?"

"Not me," Tod said. "I've got business of my own and Frisco's not my town. Right now I'm lookin' for a lawyer named Dougherty. Know him?"

"Chester Dougherty was my partner," the man said. "I'm Braxton Raiford."

Tod's eyes narrowed. "You say Dougherty *was* yore pardner?"

"Mr. Dougherty's dead." Raiford lifted his hand wearily. "If you had business with him, perhaps I could help you. Would you care to come to my office?"

The lawyer turned and Tod followed up the stairs to a comfortable, booklined office. Raiford sat down behind his desk and was the first to resume the conversation.

"A lawyer's position is not an enviable one in San Francisco. Hook

Kinard was just up to try to get me to defend a murderer who was caught red-handed. I refused, of course, for I want to see the man hanged. Few enough get caught. Mr. Dougherty was a fine, respected man. It was he who started the citizens' movement which I am trying to carry on. He was killed looking after a client's interests."

"Tough," Tod muttered. "He wrote me a long time ago about a boat I fell heir to. My name's Tod Rand."

"So you came anyway." Raiford's black eyes kindled with anger. "It was I who added that postscript to your letter warning you to stay away from here."

"Yeah, I'm obliged for the warnin'," Tod said. "Just the same a boat out in that harbor belongs to me. I want to find out what the chances are for sellin' it."

"Listen to me, Mr. Rand," the lawyer said earnestly. "There's no market for any sort of boat. The harbor's full of them, going begging. As soon as they arrive, the crews make for the gold fields, leaving their ships to rot. I've warned you once, but I'll do it again. Forget your legacy and get out of this town fast as you can."

"I don't reckon I can do that," Tod said, trying to hide his disappointment. "After comin' this far, I aim at least to have a look at what was left me."

"Do you value a look—more than your life?"

"I figure I can have both."

"Not long after he wrote you, Chester Dougherty decided he should look over your property as the lawyer handling the case. I begged him to stay away from the harbor but he wouldn't listen. It was on that trip that he got killed!"

"I'm sorry to hear that," Tod said slowly. "But if you'll just tell me—"

"I'll tell you nothing!" Raiford exclaimed and his voice sounded angry. "I'll have no part in it if another fool wants to go to his death. I told you to stay away because—well, one hears things. I've told you again. Now if you want to go ahead, it's up to you."

"What things have you heard?"

Raiford's eyes darted to the door and then to the window. He said hurriedly, "I'm through talking."

"All right," Tod said, anger edging into his own voice, "yore conscience is clear if anything happens to me. But I'll tell you somethin'. I don't like this town and I don't like people walkin' around peepin' over their shoulders scared of their shadows. Maybe I own a wooden bathtub that's rottin' to pieces. But it's mine and no fog-skulkin' rats are goin' to keep me from claimin' it."

"Very well, young man," Braxton Raiford said wearily. "Would that I could wish you luck but it would be a waste of breath. You'll be dead before morning."

CHAPTER III

BLUE DIAMOND JACKPOT

AS Tod left the building he had to admit that if anyone in San Francisco wanted to get him, the chances were good.

The fog had taken over and it was worse than the darkest night he had ever seen. Even in complete darkness, a rangeman could sense the outline of objects. A keen ear could always detect movement. Nothing was visible for more than a foot or two in this fog and it deadened sound. There weren't many pedestrians now, but Tod ran right up on two or three before he

knew they were there. Their figures loomed suddenly in the gray mists and seemed to float away like ghosts.

Tod moved over close to the buildings and walked noiselessly, his nerves tight-strung as wires. What he needed first was information, and if his hunch had been right he knew where he could get it. He headed for the green-painted gambling casino.

The swiftness with which the attack was launched at Tod's back indicated that either he had been closely followed since leaving the building which housed Raiford's office, or murderous bands of thieves made fair game of anybody walking the streets.

A ringing boot heel gave Tod just warning enough for him to whirl. He struck for his guns but was too late—a half dozen mist-shrouded figures slammed into him and they all went down. It was a brutal, slashing fight in which the dirtiest barroom tactics of the meanest border dives were used. When Tod got the first boot heel ground into his leg he saw what he was up against and started using elbows, boots, head, everything he could.

It wasn't enough. His assailants had him too greatly outnumbered. A knife slashed across his ribs and with the realization that he was fighting for his life, Tod heaved up from under the struggling mass.

His desperate lunge flung half the attackers off the boardwalk into the street which was more than two feet deep in mud. They floundered in the muck and that gave Tod his chance—he got his guns out. He struck savagely and a glancing blow sent another man reeling headfirst into the bog. From the mists a gun roared and a brief rift in the fog gave Tod a glimpse of a man he hadn't seen before—a indistinct, dark figure which had kept aloof from the fighting. But he had a gun and Tod, dodging aside, chopped a shot at him.

The lead was thrown when Tod was off balance but he saw the man grab for his left leg down close to the ankle. He stumbled back and the fog closed about him.

Tod spun but the murderous pack had no stomach for gun work. The two still on the boardwalk shouted a warning and ran for it. Those in the street fought their way through the mire toward the far side, dragging the unconscious man with them.

Tod's mood was so savage he was half of a mind to follow but gave up the idea. He found his hat and jerked it on. He hadn't been able to get a look at a single one of his attackers. The slash which was soaking his side with blood might have been made with a knife—or a steel hook. Tod didn't know anything except that he'd taken a pretty thorough beating—and that he hated San Francisco.

He stalked down the street with reckless disregard of the noise he made, for he had a gun in each hand and from here on in he meant to use them.

BUT when Tod shouldered his way through the doors of the Lucky Shamrock, the tough cast of his face lessened. The place was jammed to the walls with miners and tenderfeet. They were gambling, drinking, and jawing, but over their heads Tod could see a large woman of indeterminate age whose regal bearing dominated the place as surely as though she'd been a queen in a palace.

Tod started shoving toward her, but before he got there she turned,

saw him and let out a whoop that was anything but queenlike.

"You rampagin' Texas maverick!" she called. "You whip-sawed saddle-pounder! You no-good brush-poppin' Texican!"

As he came up, Tod grinned slowly and said, "I figured nobody would ruin the front of a good drinkin' place with such gosh-awful paint but Clonakilty Clare."

"And show me the place that wouldn't be improved by the color of green and a few shamrocks!" Clare answered indignantly. She placed a hand on each of Tod's shoulders and continued, "Boy, it's good to see somebody from the brush country. It's been—"

"Twenty or twenty-five years," Tod said mildly, "and you don't look a day over thirty, Clare."

"You barkin' whelp of an Indian cur, I ain't over thirty—anyhow not much." Clonakilty Clare laughed whole-heartedly, then her eyes narrowed as she noticed Tod's blood-soaked side. "Last time I saw you, you was drippin' blood. You been pourin' it out all the five or six years in between?"

"One time and another, I reckon."

"Where'd you get that?"

"It was handed me by way of a welcome to your nice, neighborly city. But it's no more'n skin-deep."

"You always took a lot of killin'." Clare's bright-blue eyes twinkled as she lifted her voice above the hubbub of the saloon: "Have one on the house, boys. Drink to Tod Rand, a tough fightin' Texican who's maybe just what this boom camp needs."

The crowd let out a roar, craning their necks to get a look at the man who was responsible for their good luck. Tod was swept along to the bar.

"Give him the best, Hopper," Clare said to the barman. "He's a maverick I knew a few years ago when I didn't have any better sense than to run a place of refreshment down in the cow country."

"I don't reckon it did make you rich." Tod winked at the bartender. "Clare was so busy stakin' every broke cowpuncher—which means all of 'em—to meals and drinks she never had a chance to make a profit."

"She ain't changed," the barman grunted. "Half the gold hunters in the fields wouldn't be there if 'twarn't for Clare stakin' 'em."

"Just a sucker for a touch," Clare said wryly. "But my memory ain't short, Tod. I mind the time that fourflushin' foreman of the Anchor got fresh with me. It was you whittled him down to a shadow a banshee wouldn't recognize."

"I never did like that hombre," Tod remarked.

"And you never did dislike a fight. What are you doin' in Frisco?"

The men closest around were listening as they drank and Tod's stubborn streak got the upperhand. He said distinctly, "I'm tryin' to turn a little profitable deal with the *Blue Diamond*."

The effect was electrifying. The men nearby were shocked into silence for a moment, while those farther back strained to hear what was causing the odd quiet.

A prospector asked in a strangled voice, "What was that you said, brother?"

"I said," Tod repeated shortly, "I'm tryin' to pick up a little money on a deal with the *Blue Diamond*."

A MINER cursed and that guttural sound was picked up by scores of voices until the saloon rocked with a savage roar. There was a mass surge toward Tod and

his sharp glance at the wild, hate-filled faces was enough for him to know he had a mob to reckon with. They were out to get him and they didn't mean to waste any time about it.

Tod squared his back against the bar, hands on his guns, his slitted eyes momentarily holding off the men immediately before him. But he knew it could last only a moment. Those in the back were pressing forward and the fuse to the powder keg was about burned out. Tod could take a few with him, but there was no way out of the packed wedge of humanity. Twelve bullets couldn't hold off that raging throng.

But Tod had reckoned without Clonakilty Clare. At the first menacing growl she had flashed a signal to her house men. They didn't seem to like their chore, but they were intensely loyal to their boss. Almost before he knew it, Tod found himself ringed by a dozen tough brawlers who faced the crowd with drawn guns and leaded blackjacks.

"Lead out to the back room!" Clare ordered sharply. "Come on, Tod."

"I'm not runnin' from these high-binders," Tod said rashly. "I don't know what's eatin' 'em, but let 'em try—"

"Don't be a stubborn fool!" Clare cried. "Come on!"

"You heard the boss, feller," a house man said out of the corner of his mouth. "Come on or I'll bust your skull with a blackjack and drag you."

Tod gave in unwillingly, not liking what could be construed as hiding behind a woman's skirts. But he was in a bad jam and knew it. The shouting of the crowd had turned ominously ugly. A gun roared from the rear of the throng and a half dozen bottles on the back-bar splintered.

That was the signal for the house men. They drove straight through the crowd with Tod and Clare at the center of the wedge. They were halfway across the room when the wild shouting turned sullen and it was possible to distinguish voices.

A miner bellowed, "Jest tell us one thing, Clare. This is the fust one o' them snakes we been able to get our hands on and you're sidin' him. How come?"

"He's not one of 'em," Clare said, her eyes flashing.

"He said so hisself!" another man shouted. "You're lettin' yoreself in for somethin', Clare, sidin' him! You been doin' all right in Frisco—"

"And so has everybody who's come to my place," Clare answered heatedly. "The games are square and I don't rob you for whiskey. If you can't trust me one time, get out of the Shamrock and stay out!"

"That we will!" a prospector roared. "You're done in this camp, lady!"

A shout of agreement followed and Tod swore. He tried to break out of the ring of house men, but Clare jerked her head and her men herded Tod on to the back room. Once there Tod, chagrined and angry, turned to face Clare.

"That was close enough," she said cheerfully.

"What's goin' on?" Tod broke out. "What got into that pack of n ucks—"

"What got into you, you locoed maverick?"

TOD looked at Clare. "I got a boat named the *Blue Diamond*," he said. Then he told her why he had come to San Francisco.

Clare listened, then said soberly, "I knew you hadn't turned bronc. It's

just tough luck your schooner happens to be named *Blue Diamond.* Those men out there ain't to be blamed too much, only I take it personal when they don't trust me."

"What—"

"The Blue Diamond is the name of the murderin', thievin' gang that's runnin' this city," Clare said. "Nobody knows who the cutthroats are, but it ain't safe to be caught on the streets when the fog rolls. Prospectors are robbed and killed. Storekeepers have to pay off or they're burned out. Folks are scared of their shadows because they don't know when they'll be next or what they're fightin'.

"If the Blue Diamond lists a man for boothill, nothin' can save him. There've been a few who tried to organize against the Diamond. Their names have been posted in the plaza in the middle of a diamond drawn with blue chalk. Just one man, a lawyer named Raiford, is still alive after the Blue Diamond posted him and odds are a hundred to one he won't be alive a week from now."

Tod's face was grim with contrition. He said, "I reckon I been actin' knotheaded as a longhorn. Thing was, nobody ever took time to tell me anything, they just jumped me and that got my hackles up. But now I've got you into it. Folks are thinkin' you sided a Blue Diamond hombre and so they'll make it tough on you."

"I'll get along," Clare said lightly. "We've been friends a long time, Tod. I'd rather have one real friend than a saloonful of whiskey drinkers."

Tod nodded slowly and in a quiet voice said, "It happens I stick by my friends, too."

He jerked his head up as a loud call rang through the building. Clare laughed delightedly and when Tod glanced at her, she colored.

"That's the MacGregor Clan," she explained quickly. "Nobody can let out a bellow like that but Bruce MacGregor, a big slab of bacon—"

"I've met him," Tod interrupted. He told briefly of the incident on the trail and added, "Maybe those boys had a reason to get tough but they could have told me the reason. I said I'd look 'em up and I aim to now."

"Wait, Tod. Bruce and me—well, those boys are my friends, too. Promise you'll stay here."

"I'm not hidin' behind you any longer," Tod said harshly.

"I'm askin' you as a favor to wait just five minutes."

Clare didn't even wait for an answer. She moved quickly through the door. Tod stood unmoving while he tried to size up the situation. His boat had faded into the background. Clare was in a jam on his account and his first job now was to square that debt. He had to prove to the people of San Francisco that Clare hadn't sided a member of the Blue Diamond gang and the only way to do that was to turn up some of the gang itself.

Tod had a sudden hunch. It grew so strong in his mind as he took a turn around the room that it became conviction.

"Just could be I'll turn up the head of the gang," he muttered. "I never saw a pack of rats yet that didn't break up when the head rat was stomped. Reckon I'll have a look at my boat, after all."

HE settled his guns and walked through the door. The saloon was empty of customers except for the McGregor Clan which was gathered around Clare and Bruce at the bar. The Scotsmen were dour-looking but the speed with which they

were downing huge drinks showed that their glum appearance was not caused by thirst.

They turned as Tod approached and watched him carefully. Tod walked straight to the giant Bruce and said shortly, "I told you I'd look you up, MacGregor. Nobody's got a gun in their hand now so—"

"Seems you've done about enough, lad," the big Scotsman said, "without goin' on the prod with the MacGregor Clan."

"I know what I've done," Tod said wickedly. "That's my business and I'll square it."

"Spoke out like a man," Bruce approved. All at once he grinned. "Clare's told me how things stand. A friend of hers is a friend of mine. I take back them hard names I called you. Matter of fact, you've done me a favor. I been tryin' to get Clare to quit this business and marry me. She's willin' to marry me, but she's so all-fired ornery Irish she won't give up this place."

"And you're so stubborn Scotch," Clare cut in, "you won't come to town and help me run it."

"Looks like I win just the same," Bruce said with a rumbling laugh. "Time that mob that was in here gets through spreadin' the word you're a friend of the Blue Diamond crowd, you won't have a single customer left."

"You want to stay in business, Clare?" Tod asked.

"I *aim* to stay in business no matter—" Clare broke off as she read the purpose in Tod's craggy face. "What's on your mind, Tod?"

"Not a thing except it was me drove yore customers off. It's up to me to get 'em back."

"Don't try to buck this town, Tod," Clare said sharply. "You can't do it!"

"I can try," Tod said meagerly.

A house man came in from the direction of the plaza. A paper was visible in his hand as he headed for the group. He didn't speak when he walked up, just tossed the paper to the bar for all to see. A diamond drawn with blue crayon was outlined on the white sheet and, also in blue, in the center of the diamond was a neatly lettered: TOD RAND.

"They're coming at you from all sides, lad," Bruce MacGregor said somberly. "You're fair game for honest men—and now the Blue Diamond has got you posted."

"That bein' the case," Tod said briefly, "I'll go out where they can find me."

He headed for the door and was gone before anybody could stop him.

CHAPTER IV

SQUARE-RIGGED BOOTHILL

WHEN Tod reached the street, the gray tinge of the fog was darkening perceptibly, indicating that night was approaching. But black fog was only slightly worse than gray fog and where Tod was going it didn't matter. He had a chore to do and he swung down the boardwalk, tight-lipped, tough-jawed, expecting the worst and ready to tackle it with all the resources of an efficient fighting man.

He headed for the water front, walking carefully but swiftly. He met no one on the streets now that night was approaching, which began to bother him when he reached the docks, for he had to have a few directions before he could get on with his job. He felt his way along to the very edge of the wharf, then began to walk along it while he tried to figure the next move.

He walked up on the sailor almost before he knew it. Tod's hands streaked for his guns, but the lonely,

dried-up figure, leaning against a piling, barely turned his head.

Tod drove straight to the point. He said, "You know yore way around out among them ships, mister?"

"Aye, I do that," the sailor answered. "Only nobody but a fool and me as don't care would go out there."

"I'll pay you if you'll take me where I want to go," Tod said. "If money don't interest you, I'll have to use a gun."

"I ain't scared o' guns. Where you want to go, matey?"

"To the *Blue Diamond*."

"I was thinkin' you don't look like that kind," the sailor remarked indifferently. "There was a time I was proud to take anybody aboard the *Diamond*. Now you can swim out for all o' me."

"My business is on the level, fellow," Tod said evenly. "I own the *Blue Diamond*."

"You?" Sharp interest snapped the seaman around. "Aye, the skipper said afore he passed on he was goin' to leave the *Diamond* to a cowman that didn't know fore from aft."

"I'm him," Tod acknowledged. "You know where the boat is?"

"Do I know? Listen, matey—skipper. I shipped on the *Diamond* for years. But like all the rest o' the loggerheads I jumped ship when I hit Frisco and headed for the gold fields. I been out there a long time and I got a bellyful o' land. I come back today and been tryin' to get a berth. Ain't none to be had. I rowed out to the *Diamond* today just to get the feel of 'er under my feet again. I was yelled off, and when I didn't pay no attention, I was run off with guns. What the hell's goin' on aboard the *Diamond*?"

"That's what I aim to find out."

"You mean the *Diamond's* been pirated from you? Well, count on Jib to lend you a hand, skipper. We'll get 'er back. I've seen bilge scum sneakin' to and from the *Diamond* all day and thought maybe they was your outfit. If you mean to run them galley rats off her, I'm your man. I'd give up hope o' ever gettin' a berth again, so I was past carin' what happened to me."

"All right, Jib," Tod said. "You get me out there and I'll see what I can do about runnin' the rats off."

The sailor disappeared without a word. Tod frowned but waited where he stood. The next he heard from Jib, the man was directly beneath his feet.

"Here y'are, skipper. I knew where a skiff was tied up so I borrowed it. Come down easy off the dock."

Tod eased himself off the wharf and dropped into the rowboat. Immediately it pulled away, so skillfully handled that the oars didn't make a sound. Tod could scarcely see Jib, but he talked in a gentle, crooning voice of the *Blue Diamond* as they pulled out into the harbor. He said she was the bonniest ship ever to come through the Golden Gate and her brass was still shiny, her sails strong, her rigging sound, and that she was in no way like the rotting hulks surrounding her. Tod listened for a few minutes, feeling a kinship with the seafaring man. He spoke of his ship as a cowman spoke of his horse.

But Tod's mind jerked back to the job ahead when Jib said softly, "Quiet now, skipper, we're gettin' close."

"All right. Put me where I can get aboard, then wait for me. I don't know how long I'll be, but I might want to get away fast."

"I'd like to go aboard with you."

"No. Wait for me."

"Aye, aye, sir."

They were sliding through the gloomy graveyard of ships now. Jib pulled his boat with uncanny instinct until at last Tod realized they weren't moving. Above him reared the dim outline of a ship. The skiff gently nosed the anchor chain and Tod grabbed hold. He had the dislike of all gunmen for being forced to engage both hands, but there seemed to be no help for it. He swung out and went up the chain hand over hand.

CAREFUL as Tod was, it was his unfamiliarity with the sea that threw him as he went over the side. He landed on the poop deck just as the ship dipped after a swell. The receding deck threw him off balance and in trying to catch himself he stepped on some loose gear. Tod went down with enough noise to wake the ghosts of long departed seafarers. He lay where he landed, guns in his hands, breathing fast and straining for the sound of movement.

He heard nothing and after a few moments eased to his feet. He found the ladder and slipped down to the after deck. He didn't know his back was to a door leading into the fo'c's'le below the poop. He did hear the swish of fast-moving men, but before he could turn, a dozen men had swarmed all over him. Tod would have made a fight of it under any possible conditions but he was slammed down with such force that his head hit the deck and that was all he knew for the next half-hour.

Tod came to with the sensation of a sharp knife being dragged across his forehead. He opened his eyes as Hook Kinard raked the wicked instrument which served him for a hand across Tod's forehead. Tod jerked back, shaking the blood out of his eyes.

"Thought that'd wake you up," Hook said viciously. "But I ain't no more'n sliced the skin. Wait till — I really go to work on you, fellow."

Tod didn't answer until he'd looked about him. In addition to Kinard, there were fifteen or eighteen of the most evil-looking men gathered together in the crew's mess that were ever gathered in one room anywhere.

Tod's glance returned to Kinard. He said contemptuously, "The back-stabbin' rats of the Blue Diamond gang, I reckon."

Hook struck him across the face and grunted, "Better put a halter on yore tongue, fellow. We've had a bellyful of you already."

"So it was you jumped me this afternoon."

"That's right." Kinard couldn't forego the chance to brag. "It ain't often anybody gets away from the Blue Diamond. You was lucky. But we knew we'd get you. When you popped yore jaw in the Shamrock Saloon this afternoon about the *Blue Diamond,* we heard about it and figured you was the cow rassler owned this scow and you'd be along sooner or later to look 'er over. How you like her looks, fellow?"

"Not bad," Tod drawled, "only for the skunk smell. Not a bad set-up either. I don't reckon anybody would think of a good boat buried out in these others as bein' yore hide-out. You keep people scared to go about the water front, and that makes it easy for you to run after yore killin' and robbin'. If the weak-kneed citizens ever did get guts enough to go on the prod, it wouldn't be hard to hold 'em off, either."

"You got it all figgered, fellow," Kinard acknowledged. "Not that it'll ever do you any good. I'm gonna rip you into such little pieces the gulls won't even get a good mouthful."

"You better tie me down first," Tod said briefly. "Who's the brains of this outfit, Kinard? It shore can't be you. Anybody can tell you haven't the sense of a locoed sheepherder in a longhorn stampede."

Kinard leaped forward, his face twisted with the vicious urge to kill. Tod's hands weren't tied and he lunged off the chair, swinging it around as he spun aside. But the other men were ready for any such move. They jumped him, bore him down, then roughly jerked him to his feet. Hook, mouthing profanity, was being held by several others.

"Take it easy, Hook," a man said. "You know the boss wouldn't like it if you was to carve this sucker up before he got here."

"Then take 'im off where I can't see him or I won't wait till the boss comes," Kinard bellowed. "Go on, take 'im out o' here. Put 'im in the storeroom 'fore I slit his gizzard!"

Tod didn't even take off his hat as he leaped off the deck after the leader of the Blue Diamond gang.

CHAPTER V

STORM WARNING

AN hour later Tod had given up. A minute search had proved the storeroom to be tight as a drum and Tod had spent an extra five minutes cursing the little round window which was just too small for a man to slip through. He sat down on a box, idly wondering if there might have been another way he could have played his cards. His hunch about the headquarters of the Blue Diamond gang had been right, but despite the fact that he had driven Hook Kinard into a rage, the man hadn't divulged the name of the leader of the gang. Tod would find out soon enough now, but it would never do him any good.

More than anything else he hated that he wouldn't get a chance to square things for Clonakilty Clare. Then he got to thinking of cowhands around a campfire after a day in the saddle, of wind on the sage in the early morning, of the strong feel of a hard-running horse—

In the creaking of rigging and stays Tod paid no attention to the thump beyond the storeroom door at first. But a scraping at the door jerked him to his feet. The door swung open a few inches and Jib's voice came through the crack: "Sorry to disobey orders, skipper, but I thought with things the way they are—"

"Forget orders, quit callin' me skipper, much obliged and let's get the hell out of here!" Tod snapped as he leaped toward the door.

"Aye, aye, skipper."

On deck Tod saw the dim outline of the man who had been on guard. After that there was no chance to see anything. Tod took hold of Jib's shirt and the wiry seaman weaved through the mist-laden shadows with as much assurance as though it had been daylight. When they reached the poop-deck rail, Jib slipped over and went down the anchor chain like a monkey. Tod was swinging over when Hook Kinard bellowed at midship: "That cow nurse has got out! Comb the ship! Scour the harbor! I'll rip you dogs to pieces if he gets away!"

Tod dropped the last ten feet into the skiff and his feet had barely touched when the rowboat shot away. Jib maneuvered in and out among the hulks at top speed for five minutes, then he slowed down a little and chuckled.

"I figured you might need me, skipper. I come along soon after and found out they had you in the mess."

"I was shore in a mess," Tod agreed.

"It was a right good while before things cooled off enough for me to get at that guard with a belayin' pin. So that's the gang of rats I been hearin' about since I got back to Frisco. Ain't no wonder they picked the *Diamond* for quarters, snug and fit as she is. But she never had rats aboard before. We got to get 'em off."

"That's what I'm thinkin'," Tod said meagerly. "It's goin' to be a job, now they'll be lookin' for us. But I think I know where I can get about twenty good fightin' men."

"Count me in, skipper," Jib said quickly.

"All right. You're a good man, Jib. Come on to the Shamrock with me while I get a fightin' outfit together."

BUT Tod was doomed to disappointment. The Shamrock was completely empty of customers when they arrived, but the bartender said the MacGregor Clan had taken over

the back room for the night. Tod and Jib went on back to find the Scotsmen drinking and playing cards. With no business to attend to, Clare had gone to her room on the second floor.

Tod briefly told the MacGregor Clan the hunch he had had about the Blue Diamond gang and of the happenings when he had played his hunch out.

"It's no fight of yores," he concluded, "and if it was just to get hold of my ship I wouldn't be askin' a favor of you. But Clare will be put out of business if I don't square her with the town and—well, I never saw a bunch of square hombres that weren't ready to do a job of snake killin' when the job needed doin'."

The Scotsmen had listened attentively and without comment. When Tod finished all eyes turned to Bruce. The big man sat thinking for several minutes before making up his mind. At last he turned to Tod.

"There're three reasons we'll have to turn you down, lad," MacGregor said. "If the snakes had bit us, we'd stomp 'em, but we ain't of a mind to butt into business that don't concern us. Second, San Francisco ain't our town, and if the folks that live here can't clean it up, there's no reason we should do it for 'em. Third and last, you're forgettin' I *want* Clare to get put out o' business."

Tod nodded briefly, trying to hide his disappointment. He turned out of the room with Jib beside him and wearily went to the bar. He bought a pair of guns from the bartender, then ordered drinks for himself and Jib.

Jib twisted his glass and said ruminatively, "I was shipmates with a Scot one time—"

"Yeah, Tod interrupted absently.

Jib tried again. "This Scot I was shipmates with—"

Again Jib was interrupted when a young Scotsman of the MacGregor Clan came up beside Tod. "Just thought I'd tell you, friend," the Scotsman said, his eyes twinkling, "that Bruce has said many a time he'd a mind to clean out the Blue Diamond gang so San Francisco would be a decent place to live in and come to. No man loves a fight more than Bruce and he's worth ten men when the goin's tough. That goes for all the boys. Any other time Bruce would be r'arin' to go after them cutthroats. But now he's got it in his mind to take Clare down a peg and have his way—and he's a mite stubborn. If you could find a way to change his mind—well, just thought I'd tell you."

Tod shrugged. "Seems like his mind's made up."

The moment the Scotsman turned to go back to join his companions, Jib said, "Like I was tellin' you, I was shipmates with this Scot—"

"There's as good a chance to argue with a hardheaded longhorn," Tod interrupted shortly. "You and I can't tackle that gang by ourselves, Jib, and there's just one chance left. I got to make a call. Comin'?"

"No, sir, I think I'll stay here and think about my old shipmate. If you could let me have a few quid I might make friends with the boys in the back room. Maybe they knew my old shipmate. He was from Scotland."

Tod gave Jib some money and headed for the street. The lawyer, Braxton Raiford, and the scared citizens of San Francisco were his last chance. But with the Blue Diamond crowd located and in one

place, the citizens might get up the spunk to do something about it.

TOD was relieved to see a light in Raiford's office when he approached, and a few minutes later the lawyer's deep voice answered his knock.

Tod went in and Raiford's brows lifted. He said, "You've more nerve than sense, I'm afraid, Rand. The streets of San Francisco are hardly a place for a lone man after dark."

"Maybe they can be made safe," Tod answered tersely. "I've located the hide-out of the Blue Diamond gang, Raiford."

"You have!" Raiford exclaimed.

"It's on my boat," Tod continued. "You say you've been trying to get the people of San Francisco to get together to wipe out this gang. Here's their chance. If you can get enough of 'em together, they can blast the Blue Diamond outfit to hell."

Raiford slammed his fist on the desk excitedly. "This is the chance we've been waiting for. Will you go with us and show us the way?"

"And throw my guns into the scrap to boot."

"San Francisco will owe you a debt, sir. It's after midnight, but I'll get word to all the men I think might be interested in seeing San Francisco become the decent city it ought to be. With the lead you've given us I might be able to get together as many as thirty or forty. It will take me at least two hours. Will you wait here at my office or come back at that time?"

"I'd like to be doin' somethin'."

"There's nothing for you to do until we get under way. I'll have to see each of the men myself."

"All right," Tod said. "I'll be back in a couple of hours."

The next thing was to figure out how to get on the *Blue Diamond* and, puzzling over this problem, Tod spent the next hour and a half walking the streets, oblivious to the fact that the Blue Diamond gang might be scouring the town for him. The more he thought the more impossible the situation became. His first thought had been to get the necessary men, but he came to realize that that was just the first step. A handful of men could hold off a thousand trying to get aboard a ship from skiffs.

Tod swore in exasperation at the difficulties caused by the sea; if this had been a range fight he could have planned the attack from every angle. At last he decided to hurry back to the Shamrock to see what help Jib might be able to give him.

When Tod came into the saloon the bartender was hanging up his apron. He eyed Tod and said abruptly, "I heard Miss Clare say she wanted to stay in business, so what I done I done for her. She's been mighty square with me. If things turn out all right, I'll be back. If they don't, I'm headin' so far away from here them MacGregors won't never find me. You tell Miss Clare for me."

"You wouldn't mind," Tod drawled, "tellin' me what you're talkin' about?"

"You'll find out."

THE bartender hurried out and Tod continued on to the back room. When he got there he found out. The MacGregor Clan was sprawled from one side of the room to the other in various grotesque positions but all in sound slumber. The Scotsmen's shirts had all been torn open. Jib sat overlooking the scene with obvious satisfaction and an expression of general well-being.

"What the devil's happened!" Tod exclaimed.

"Why, they was just like that Scotch shipmate o' mine," Jib remarked pleasantly.

"If you're goin' to start that again—"

"This time I mean to finish it, beggin' your pardon, skipper," Jib stated firmly. "That shipmate o' mine never turned down a drink that was offered him free, and if ever anybody wanted to get at him the way to do it was get at him through his pocketbook. Well, I offered these boys a drink—only first I had a little confab with the bartender. Then I lifted their money belts. See that trade-mark I rigged up?" Jib pointed to a square of paper on which a blue diamond had been drawn. "When the MacGregors come around about an hour from now, first off they'll miss their money, then they'll see that sign. Then you'll have the fighting men you need."

"You gave 'em mickeys," Tod said, smiling in spite of himself.

"Just light ones," Jib replied. "They'll come out of it any time now."

Tod shook his head. "We can't do it. Where are their belts?"

"We got to get the *Diamond* back, skipper. This is the only way. If you ain't ready to use any chance that comes along, well, I reckon I got to disobey orders again and not tell you where the money's hid."

Tod tried reason and was getting on toward losing his temper when the lid blew off. Bruce MacGregor came out of his stupor with a mighty bellow which was enough to rouse his men—and did. They missed their money belts the first thing and then Bruce saw the insignia of the Blue Diamond.

"We been robbed by them polecats!" Bruce roared. He swung toward Jib, but the seaman was just groggily getting to his feet. "They got you, too, huh? Then that whiskey was doped by the bartender. He was one of the gang o' skunks. Wait'll I get my hands on—"

"He's gone," Tod interrupted. "He was headin' out just as I came in."

An angry roar welled from the MacGregor Clan and Bruce thundered, "You was askin' for our help to wipe out them cutthroats, Tod. Well, lead on. We'll show 'em they can't tromp the MacGregors and live to brag about it!"

"Hold on, Bruce," Tod said. "You don't have to go after—"

"We do have to and what's more we wouldn't miss the chance! If you ain't got the guts to show us the way, just tell us where to find 'em!"

Tod's temper flared. "I reckon I can pull my weight but I'm just tryin' to tell you I can get yore money back without—"

"Quit stallin'!" Bruce shouted. "Either lead out or tell us the way to get there."

"You're set on goin' whether the gang stole yore money or not, I reckon," Tod said tightly.

"I just been waitin' to get a chance at them rats!" Bruce thundered, and his men shouted approval.

"All right," Tod said angrily, "you're so all-fired hardheaded you won't listen, so you'll get yore chance. But I'm runnin' this show. We'll need all the men we can get and I got some more lined up. I'll be back in a few minutes and you'll have to wait till then whether you like it or not!"

TOD raced out of the room and through the saloon before there could be any more argument. He'd tried to tell the Scotsmen a sandy

was being pulled on them, but they wouldn't listen—as a matter of fact, it was evident that Bruce MacGregor had found the excuse he was looking for to change his mind as the young Scotsman had said he would do if it could be done gracefully. The MacGregors wanted to go after the Blue Diamond gang. There was a chance now that the trick could be turned, for with Raiford's men there would be a sizable force to go at the schooner from all sides at once.

Tod raced up the stairs and burst into the lawyer's office. Raiford was not expecting the sudden entrance and was bending over at the far side of the small room. He straightened with a frown which cleared instantly when he recognized Tod. But a look of despair drew his features.

"I'm afraid it's no use, Rand," Raiford said. "I've seen all the men I thought would back us up and they are still so afraid of the Blue Diamond they won't make a move to rid the city of the murderous blackguards."

"Well, next time you see 'em," Tod snapped, "tell 'em for me they're a bunch of lily-gutted rabbits! To hell with 'em! I've got twenty good fightin' men and an hour from now we'll wipe out that gang whether the San Francisco pussyfoots will lend a hand or not!"

"You've got help?"

"Me and the MacGregor Clan will handle the chore. They're waitin' for me to come back and r'arin' to go. I reckon we can handle all the polecats aboard the *Blue Diamond* by ourselves."

"Possibly," Raiford said softly. He lifted his great coat more snugly about his shoulders, took a step forward—and limped badly on his left leg.

Tod froze. The figure muffled in the coat standing in the shadows at the far side of the room was the same one which had been vaguely outlined in the fog the time Tod was jumped, the same one he had shot in the leg. Sure, it was all plain as writing now. Raiford was the brains of the Blue Diamond gang. That was why he had tried to keep Tod from coming to San Francisco.

Raiford hadn't wanted the hideout discovered. Without a doubt Raiford had had his partner murdered. And with diabolical cleverness, Raiford had taken his partner's place as head of the citizens' movement. That way Raiford could keep tab on the most active men in the movement and have them killed. Small wonder the people of San Francisco were afraid of their shadows. Any move on their part and they would be marked for death by the most respected man in the city.

Tod swore and leaped forward—but Raiford had been reading his face as though it were an open book. The lawyer dodged back, a secret door in the wall flicked open, slammed shut, and Raiford was gone. Tod lunged at the secret door, pounded it with his fists, drove his shoulder into the wall, all to no avail. Raiford was gone and the Blue Diamond gang aboard the ship would be warned that Tod and the MacGregors were coming!

Tod wasted no time cursing what was done. He returned to the Shamrock as fast as he could find the Scotsmen impatiently waiting for him. They jumped to their feet when Tod entered but paused when they saw the look on his face.

"Things have changed," Tod said briefly. "We'll have no help in this fight. Braxton Raiford is head of the Blue Diamond gang and he

knows we're comin'. Never mind how he knows, he knows. That lets you men out. I'm goin' after Raiford, but—"

"No crooks can steal our money and get away with it!" Bruce stated sourly. "Will you show us where that boat—"

"Your money," Tod said, "hasn't been stolen."

"I'm headin' for the water front," Bruce bellowed. "Who's comin' with me?"

"Reckon we better go along, skipper," Jib put in succinctly. "Now, about the way to do this job, I got me an idea."

CHAPTER VI

CARGO OF VENGEANCE

WHEN daylight seeped through the shadows of San Francisco harbor, it seemed to stir the fog to movement. The blanket of misty night began slowly to lift, so that the early dawn was a pattern of shifting, curling blotches of wispy shadows.

Aboard the *Blue Diamond* some twenty-five men, armed with rifles and shotguns, walked the decks, peering through the treacherous dawn for sight of a flotilla of skiffs they were certain must come soon. They were jauntily confident, for they could safely pick off attackers from behind the bulkheads as long as the fools kept coming. Afterward they would have to shift their hide-out, but they meant to see to it that San Francisco paid a thousand times over for causing them the trouble.

Hook Kinard stomped about the decks, keeping an eye on everything, and it was he who saw the derelict ship bearing down on the *Blue Diamond*. The hulk moved gently in the swift-running tide but it was headed straight for the *Blue Diamond*.

"That damned wreck's busted loose!" Kinard roared. "Some of you men get over there and fend it off!"

Half of the outfit moved to the side toward which the hulk was coming. Just as its prow was about to crash head-on into the *Blue Diamond*, the ship swung around and eased in broadside. The swirling mists lifted and a man shouted fearfully, "There's a sailor at the wheel of that wreck!"

At the same moment Braxton Raiford rushed from the officers' cabin and called sharply, "Watch for a trick, Hook."

The warning came too late. The derelict bumped the side of the *Blue Diamond* and the crash was drowned in a great shout that once had rung through the glens and fells of a distant land. Intermingled with that shout was the piercing yell of the range and up from behind the derelict's bulkheads reared twenty-odd Scotsmen, a fighting cowhand, and a sailor fighting for his ship.

Tod, guns roaring in both hands, leaped aboard the *Blue Diamond* and Jib was right beside him with an old navy pistol thundering its heavy shots. The yells of the Scotsmen faded as they let their weapons do their talking for them.

The Blue Diamond gang, vicious killers under cover of fog or darkness, found themselves in the open facing a withering fire from men who were driven by reckless courage and hatred for all things treacherous and evil. The murderous gang fell back, all but routed by that first attack.

Then Braxton Raiford's harsh voice bit through the roll of gunfire and in a matter of seconds the tide of the fighting changed. The terrified members of the gang braced and

all at once a triumphant yell tore from their throats.

Tod, ramming cartridges into his guns, sensed the change in the situation and jerked his head around. His mouth hardened into grim lines. Jib was beside him and close behind were a half dozen of the MacGregor Clan. But that was all. The rest of the Scotsmen hadn't been quick enough to get aboard the *Blue Diamond* when the two ships came together. The derelict ship had recoiled from the shock of the crash and was now drifting away in the tide, carrying Bruce MacGregor and all but a half dozen of his helplessly swearing men beyond reach of the fight.

The tug of a bullet through his shirt brought the desperate situation home to Tod. Odds of four to one was all that was needed to give courage to the Blue Diamond gang and they surged back for the kill with guns belching leaden death.

"COME on!" Tod whipped out, and dived behind the hatch cover of the after hold. His men plunged down beside him and quickly scattered out the length of the hatch. The forward sweep of the gang was checked as from behind the protection of the hatch the attackers raked the deck. Tod triggered his guns with blinding speed and the accurate shooting tumbled one man headlong and winged another.

But the gang quickly found cover behind countless appurtenances and then the weight of their numbers began to tell. The end of the hatch was constantly swept with lead from end to end. The eight men there had no chance to do more than throw an occasional quick ineffective shot before having to duck down.

Interspersed with the rolling gunfire could be heard the bellowing voice of Hook Kinard and the cutting tones of Braxton Raiford, driving their killers on. And the men needed little driving. Under the barrage being laid down, there was small risk to themselves as they edged forward from cover to cover to tighten the circle about the hatch end.

"Looks like we're marooned, skipper, with the sharks comin' closer," Jib remarked.

"It don't look so good," Tod answered tightly, edging up to empty his guns to little purpose.

"What's more, it's lookin' worse," Jib commented. He indicated the main mast on the far side of which a man could barely be made out working his way upward.

Tod threw several slugs that way but the man was well protected by the mast. For just a moment, as he shifted position, the butt of a rifle showed.

"That'll do it," Tod grunted. "Once he gets high enough he can pour lead down on us."

"And them that would help us can't get to us, and them that could get to us won't," Jib grunted.

He was scanning the harbor through squinted eyes. The derelict ship with Bruce and the other men aboard had run between two other hulks and hung up fast. The Scotsmen tried to put a boat over the side but its rotten sides caved when they shoved it out. The gunfire aboard the *Blue Diamond* had drawn a crowd to the docks, a crowd which grew larger and larger by the minute.

The people of San Francisco were not afraid to come together to the water front in the bright sunlight of morning, but their interest was nothing more than curiosity. They didn't know what was going on out

in the harbor and it was obvious they had no intention of trying to find out. Tod's little handful of hard-pressed men were on their own. Jib carefully looped a rope over a bitt and tested it.

"Aim to play skip-the-rope?" Tod asked sarcastically.

"I aim to go for a swim," Jib answered. "I'd rather drown than get shot any day. Hope you can hold 'em off, skipper."

With a sudden leap Jib was gone. The unexpectedness of his move gave him time to reach the rail and by the time fire was directed at him he was over the side and gone with the end of the rope trailing after him. A young Scotsman growled a curse. Tod, too, was disappointed that Jib should run out on them and yet Tod didn't blame the sailor. This really wasn't his fight and the set-up was hopeless. When one of the Blue Diamond gang tried to get to the rail to pick Jib off in the water, Tod risked getting killed to drive the man back from the side of the ship.

After that there was little time to think about anything. The gunfire grew more intense. The man climbing the mast paused to try a shot and his lead grooved Tod's shoulder. The man climbed higher and his next shot went through the leg of one of the MacGregors.

DESPERATION drove the little band behind the hatch cover to a high point of recklessness. Tough fighting men that they were, they blamed no one for their hard luck but concentrated on selling their lives as dearly as possible. That the time was not far off when they'd have to pay was soon evident. The rifle from above began to snap and its lead forced the men to hug the base of the hatch cover. With that added protection, the outlaw gang closed in more swiftly. Those in the lead reached the far end of the hatch cover.

Tod and the MacGregors could no longer even raise their heads to see where they were shooting, but they stuck their gun muzzles over the edge of their barricade and triggered as fast as their guns would work. Deafened by the crack of guns, they were barely conscious of the rumbling roar which briefly sounded throughout the ship, and the crashing noise meant nothing to them anyway.

But in a moment an anxious voice forward shouted, "The ship's movin'!"

Gunfire slacked off a little as the gang tried to find out what was happening. Tod could tell the *Blue Diamond* was gently easing forward in the grip of the in-running tide, but he couldn't see that it was of any help. He and the Scotsmen were glad for any brief respite, however, and for several minutes the shooting was desultory. During that interval Jib's voice reached clearly from the port rail of the ship.

"Cover me, skipper."

"What the devil!" Tod exclaimed.

Jib eased his grinning face to the level of the rail. "I went up the anchor chain, got into the fo'c's'le head and slipped the anchor chain. Then I went overboard and caught hold of my rope as she slid by. Now I got to get to the wheel on the poop. Cover me."

The diversion forward was almost over and when Jib leaped the rail and raced for the ladder to the poop, all attention swept aft again. Raiford cursed his men and under his lashing tongue they unloosed a hail of bullets. But Tod and the Scotsmen deliberately drew that lead to themselves. They didn't know what

Jib was up to, for they were out of their territory on water, but Jib had proved he'd never run out on a fight and they meant to give him his chance.

The sailor went down as he reached the poop deck, but fast as a cat he rolled to the safety of a pile of coiled Manila rope. Tod couldn't see what happened after that. Some strange fear had entered the Diamond gang and fear added frenzy to their fighting. They tried a rush. Tod and his men turned that first rush back, but when it was over, two of the Scotsmen were down and out of the fight. Not one of them but was bleeding in several places.

Another rush like that and it would be all over—and another rush was coming! Tod hadn't even had a chance to get but one gun loaded. He grinned briefly and said, "Reckon this is it, boys. Scotch all the snakes you can."

The rush started and was cut off in the first few steps by a terrified shout. The Diamond gang dropped back to cover and vicious cursing whipped out by a very real fear came from all sides. Tod stuck his head around a corner of the hatch cover and wild hope surged through him.

JIB, prone on the poop deck, was steering the *Blue Diamond* and already it was almost on top of the nest of hulks where the derelict with Bruce and his men aboard was hung up. Jib handled the wheel like the master steersman he was. The *Diamond* seemed bent on trying to squeeze between two of the ships. At the last moment, her prow turned straight toward the hulk on the right, crashed it solidly, and her stern swung around alongside the derelict.

Bruce and the MacGregors were not slow about coming aboard this time. They swarmed over the side with ringing shouts and their guns were flaming as they came. Tod and the men with him gave an answering yell and straightened above the hatch cover.

The Blue Diamond gang was caught between a wicked crossfire and the odds were even. They had no stomach for this sort of fighting but they had no choice and they fought like the cornered rats they were. Gun thunder rolled over the harbor to echo and re-echo from the sides of half a hundred ships. Lead whacked into solid oak and smashed wickedly into flesh.

Ranks broke and soon there were small fights going on all over the ship. Wherever possible, the Scotsmen closed with members of the gang and, throwing their guns aside, finished the job with their hands.

Tod blasted a buck-toothed killer down and jerked up the man's rifle. The Winchester was a good weapon and one quick shot spun the man in the mast out into a cartwheeling plunge to death. Tod ran forward then. He had not heard the voices of Kinard and Raiford since the ships came together and this showdown would mean nothing if the head of the gang and his ramrod weren't finished.

That Raiford had one trick left, exploded in Tod's face before he cleared midships. A tremendous billow of smoke spewed from the forward hold and obscured the bow of the *Blue Diamond*. Somewhere aft Jib let out a curse of rage, but Tod raced on.

The coal oil smoke was a dense, acrid cloud in which fighting men made grotesque figures as they struggled. Tod raced to the fo'c's'le head and when he reached the bow swore wildly. Under cover of the smoke cloud, Raiford and

Kinard had got aboard the hulk to the *Diamond's* right. It had been torn loose from its anchor when the *Diamond* rammed it and was now drifting away.

Six feet of water separated the two ships, and as Tod desperately looked about for a way to get aboard the hulk, Kinard's bellowing laugh reached him from the safety of the hulk's housing and Raiford jeered, "Stay there and fry, Rand. If you manage to reach shore, I'll get you anyhow. It won't be hard to convince the people on the docks that you're head of the Diamond gang!"

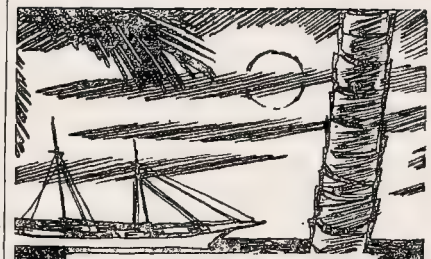
Tod had no idea of letting Raiford reach shore. He grabbed a rope from the skysail mast and swung out toward the receding hulk. Jib raced up through the smoke and yelled, "Don't go aboard that wreck, skipper! You won't come off alive!".

But Tod was gone. His feet just reached the hulk's rail and he sprawled forward on the deck. Raiford and Kinard fired as Tod spun away. At that moment the hulk abruptly lurched to starboard and listed with incredible speed.

"She's sinking!" Hook bellowed in a terrified voice. He leaped away from the housing as the ship gave another sharp lurch. Kinard went down and the murderous hook which had ripped countless men to shreds became entangled in a great pile of rope. The killer's voice lifted frenziedly as he fought the rope, only to get himself worse entangled.

Tod found to impossible to get anywhere on the sharply inclined deck. He looked desperately about for Raiford and had to admit the crooked lawyer played his cards to the end without fear. Raiford had reached the lowering rail where he flung his coat aside and dived overboard.

Tod didn't even take off his Stetson. He ran a half dozen stumbling steps and leaped feet first at Rai-



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ford in the water. He landed beside the lawyer, who turned on his back and lashed out with a knife. The edge laid Tod's face open but he got hold of Raiford's arm and struck out with the gun he still held in his right hand. The barrel broke the lawyer's collarbone and Tod's next smashing blow caught him square in the forehead.

Tod heard a great overpowering *swosh* and then a timber smashed down on his own head.

THE next Tod knew he was being hauled aboard the *Blue Diamond*. Bruce MacGregor's voice reached him dimly, "He all right?"

"He'll make out," Jib answered. "Piece o' debris cracked him, that's all. I got to him just as he was going under."

"How about them two head skunks?"

"The skipper here got the headman and that hook-armed rat was hung up fast when the hulk went down. How about that fire in the hold?"

"It didn't amount to anything," Bruce said. "The boys put it out 'thout a bit o' trouble."

Tod opened his eyes to find the fight all over. A half dozen of the gang had gone over the side to take their chances with the tide, but most of the thieves and killers were scattered about the decks. The Blue Diamond gang was a thing of the past. The Scotsmen sat around binding their wounds and were in the most hilariously high spirits Tod had ever seen them.

Tod sat up and Jib fixed him with a caustic eye. "Skipper, when the good, solid *Diamond* rams a hulk," the sailor said, "that hulk's goin' down. I told you not to get aboard her. How you feel?"

"Gosh-awful wet," Tod said disgustedly as he got to his feet. "You're a right fair hand when it comes to tricks on the water, Jib."

"Aye, sir, the sea's my home and the *Diamond* the bonniest ship ever to sail. Reminds me, I got to heave this scum off her decks and get the spare anchor over."

The sailor limped away on a bullet-scarred leg and Bruce said jovially, "Reckon everything's done to a turn, Tod."

"Reckon it is," Tod agreed. He didn't attempt to thank the men, but they knew what he meant when he said: "I'd like to buy a round of drinks for as good a fightin' crew as ever walked."

"Done," Bruce accepted soberly. "And then you'll have one on us. You boys see if you can get them boats overside and head for town. Reckon you can stand drinks right off."

"Hold on!" one of the men exclaimed. "Our money belts—"

"Tod and I'll find 'em and bring 'em to you," Bruce said quickly. "Be off with ye now."

Jib helped the men get three lifeboats over the side and in a few minutes he, Bruce and Tod were left alone aboard the ship.

Bruce eyed Jib speculatively and said, "Our dust better still be in that keg where you hid it, sailor."

"So," Tod interjected, "you knew all the time."

"Takes more'n a few drops o' stuff to put me out," Bruce said dourly, "but I played up to see what the game was. I was a mite put out, but when you didn't want to cheat, Tod, I figured you were a man for the MacGregor Clan and the time had come to side you. I ain't even out o' sorts with you, Jib, seein' what the reasons were for your cuteness. But there's just one thing."

"We're listenin'," Tod said.

"I aim to tell the boys I found their dust aboard this ship and you better never tell 'em any different."

Tod grinned. "Shore, we won't tell 'em you changed yore mind—even once."

"What I'd like to change," Jib said drearily, "is all the damned gold I got out o' the fields for a berth."

"You got some money?" Tod asked in surprise.

"I dug out about five thousand dollars' worth, but what good—"

"How'd you like to buy the *Blue Diamond?*"

"Me? Quit pullin' my leg, skipper. This ship's worth thousands more than I—"

"To me," Tod said flatly, "it's worth some good graze and some cows. Four thousand will get 'em for me and leave you enough to buy stuff with—if you can get a crew."

"Get a crew!" Jib yelled, his eyes shining. "There's plenty of sailors in this town sick for the sea—but I'd shanghai a crew if I had to! Me a skipper! And of the *Blue Diamond!*"

"I'll give you a bill of sale when we get to land," Tod said, as pleased as Jib.

A GREAT shout from the docks attracted their attention. All of San Francisco seemed to be congregated there after the MacGregor Clan had landed. Such a tremendous uproar could only result from news that the gang which had terrorized the city had been wiped out. In the forefront of the crowd a handsome blond woman waved joyfully at the three aboard the ship.

"A great girl, Clonakilty Clare," Tod remarked. "Reckon her place will be the most popular in town now."

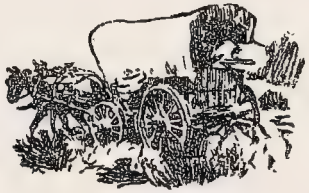
"I been thinkin' about that," Bruce said slowly. "And now we've cleaned Frisco up, it wouldn't be a bad place to live. You know, I just might decide to help Clare run the Shamrock. Yep, I think I will, now we've made the town fit to live in."

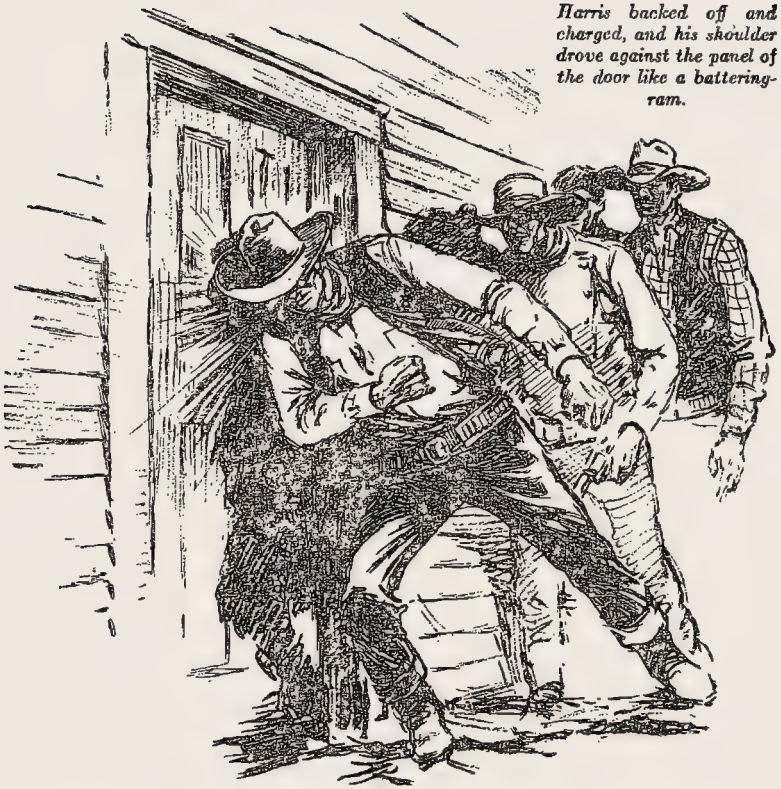
"I was shipmates with a Scotchman once," Jib said slyly. "If somebody wanted him to do somethin', he wouldn't budge for hell. But if he took a notion the other man's idea was his all the time or it was him made somethin' good out o' the idea, that shipmate o' mine could make hisself believe black was white."

"Well, there's one thing Clare's just got to do," Bruce said sourly. "She's got to change the name of that place to the Shamrock and Pipes. If she won't do that, doggoned if I'll marry her."

Tod grinned. "Frisco's yores, Bruce, and you can have the danged ocean, Jib. It's cows I want the sight of. How about untyin' another one of them boats—skipper?"

THE END





Harris backed off and charged, and his shoulder drove against the panel of the door like a battering-ram.

DEATH PLAYS AN ACE

by JAMES P. WEBB

Ernie Bellinger didn't know why he was bullet bait for those gun-slinging owlhooters, but he hoped to stay alive long enough to find out . . .

WHEN Ernie Bellinger entered his cobbler shop in Glenning that morning, the first thing he noticed was the deck of playing cards lying on his workbench. He knew they hadn't been there when he locked the door the evening before.

He cast a quick glance around the

littered room. Except for the playing cards, everything seemed as he had left it. Walking to the back door, Ernie found it properly locked on the inside.

Puzzled, he went over to the bench and stared down at the cards without touching them. They were unboxed, neatly stacked and new. The top card, the ace of diamonds, was turned up.

Ernie's gaze ranged the room again, seeking something amiss. The three lasts were clamped in place on the edge of the bench. Beyond them, among scraps of leather, lay his awls, hammers, knives. The four-legged stool stood in front of the bench, and the two old chairs were still in place against the farther wall. Repaired boots hung from nails on the walls, and others, waiting to be repaired, lay in a disordered pile on the bench. Stacked in the corner on the end of the bench, Ernie's stock of new sole leather was neat and undisturbed. The windows—

Ernie's roving glance steadied on the dingy window across the room, and his gray eyes narrowed. Four strides of his long legs carried him across the littered floor, and he lifted the lower sash two or three inches. Marks of some kind of tool were visible on the window sill, and the flimsy lock had been broken.

Ernie knew now how the intruder had entered the shop. He moved back across the room to stare at the cards again. Somebody had put them there during the night, and had gone to some trouble to do it. But why?

Leaving the cards where they were, Ernie sat down on the stool and went to work on a pair of boots. While his skilled hands were busy at his job, his alert mind was even busier with the baffling problem of the mysterious intruder.

Those cards must mean something. Whoever had left them there had intended to convey some kind of message, perhaps a threat. Ernie tried to recall some incident in his past which might be connected with playing cards, especially with the ace of diamonds. He had gambled a little, with indifferent success, during his years as a prospector, telegraph operator and freighter. He'd been mixed up in a few fights, too, but he could remember nothing that would explain the meaning of that ace of diamonds staring up at him from the workbench.

In fact, he had been a stranger in Glenning a month ago when he took over old man Stuart Conklin's boot-repair shop, and he had made no enemies since coming here.

AT noon Ernie was still puzzling over the cards and the reason they had been left in his shop. Finally he put on his crumpled old hat and went out to eat.

Leaving the front door open, as his custom was, he stood for a moment on the sidewalk, his brow creased in a frown of puzzlement. His gaze moved up and down the wide, dusty street.

Saddle horses and vehicles were tied up at the hitch rails in front of stores and saloons; and cowpunchers, cowmen, range tramps and townsmen mingled on the sidewalks. Ernie saw three women entering a store. Peace and quiet seemed to have claimed Glenning, and the street gave no answer to the mystery of the cards.

The blazing Arizona sun threw a glare on the building fronts, and an appetizing odor of cooked food drifted to Ernie's nostrils from the nearby restaurant. Shrugging his shoulders, he pulled the narrow brim of his hat farther over his high-

boned, angular face and walked across the street.

Sheriff Jasper Kerner, a big, dark-browed man with sleepy-looking eyes and a jutting under jaw, was eating a steak at one of the tables. Ernie crossed the room, pulled out a chair opposite the lawman and sat down.

"Howdy, sheriff," he greeted. "Know anything about the ace of diamonds?"

Jasper Kerner stared, and his forward-thrust jaw stopped chewing. "Ace of diamonds?" he repeated. He set his jaw to work again, swallowed and remarked: "Good card to have up your sleeve."

Grover Vance, owner of the restaurant, paused at Ernie's elbow. "What'll you have, Ernie?" he asked.

"Steak and spuds," the cobbler answered without looking at Vance. The restaurant man moved on, and Ernie said: "But does it mean anything to you?"

Kerner took a large gulp of coffee. "Depends on what else I'm holdin' "

"If somebody slipped into your office and left one on your desk, would that mean anything to you?"

Kerner lifted his dark head and studied Ernie with narrowed eyes. "Is there some point in this talk?" he asked at last.

"Maybe. Somebody broke into my shop last night and left a deck of cards on the bench. The ace of diamonds was turned up. What do you reckon?"

"Anything taken?"

"Not a thing."

The sheriff waved a hand. "Forget it. Probably somebody's notion of a joke."

Ernie had been trying to think the same thing all morning, but he couldn't free his mind of its uneasiness.

"I don't know anybody who'd want to play a prank on me," he said, "and this doesn't seem like one."

Absently Ernie began drumming on the table with his fingertips. He stopped abruptly when he saw the sheriff staring at his fingers, and he looked down at his hand. Funny that he'd be pecking out station calls with his fingers. It had been nearly three years since he'd pounded a telegraph key.

"You been a railroader?" Kerner asked.

Ernie nodded. "Tried telegraphing for a spell. Didn't like it."

"Me, too," Kerner said with sudden interest. "I was a key pounder for about eight years. Noticed you tappin' the table. Funny how the code gets in your blood, ain't it?"

Ernie nodded. He wasn't interested in telegraphy. He wanted to find the answer to that deck of cards, so that he could forget it.

The waiter brought Ernie's steak and potatoes, and he began eating. Kerner, finishing his meal, pushed back his plate and stood up.

"See you around," he said, and went over to the counter to pay for his meal.

HIS dinner finished, Ernie went out to the sidewalk. Three horses were tied up in front of his shop, and apparently the riders were waiting inside. Well, he had finished all the jobs he'd had on hand, and now he was ready for new customers. But he wished he didn't have that ace of diamonds to worry about.

He stepped off the sidewalk into the dust, and then stopped when he saw an old man emerge from a cross street.

"Hello, Mr. Conklin," he called.

Stuart Conklin appeared aged. White hair showed under the brim

of his black hat, and his face was lined and wrinkled by chronic pain. He stood in a slight stoop and carried a stout walking stick in his left hand. The right hand was twisted and crippled as a result of rheumatism.

"Howdy, boy," he said, moving slowly toward Ernie. "How's the business going?"

"Pretty good. How do you feel today?"

"Worse and worse," Conklin said. "My main regret is that I can't work. If I could, boy, I'd never have sold that shop to you so cheap." He turned slowly, painfully, and stared across at the horses in front of the shop. "Looks like you got work to do, boy."

Ernie nodded. "I reckon. Hope you feel better, Mr. Conklin." He guessed that Conklin was less old than he seemed. Years of pain and suffering had aged him. Ernie felt a twinge of pity. "Drop in and pow-wow with me sometime."

Conklin nodded his head quickly two or three times. "Thankee, I will that."

Ernie went on across the dusty street, circled past the waiting horses and stepped into the doorway.

The toughest-looking hombre he had ever seen, a man with a lopsided nose, bleak eyes and a hard, knife-scarred face, was standing in the middle of the floor smoking a cigarette and staring around.

Ernie's glance went past this man in search of his companions. Another fellow sat on one of the chairs—a lean, lathy man with black hair and dark eyes.

Both wore the garb of hard-working cowhands, and both carried holstered six-guns.

Ernie looked around for the third man, but did not find him. The scar-faced hombre grinned crookedly.

"He ain't here," he said. "Just Wing and me."

Ernie's glance, sliding around the room, struck at the workbench; and his nerves tightened when he saw that the deck of cards was no longer there. Something told him that one of these two men had removed the cards, and that they had put them there in the first place. Maybe now he would find out why.

Putting on a bold front to hide his uneasiness, Ernie walked into the shop. "You gents want something?" he asked. "I'm the cobbler."

The scar-faced man fastened his hard glance on Ernie's face. "You are, eh? Well, I'm Spence Turke, and my pard's Wing Rupp. How about patchin' my boot?"

"Sure," Ernie said. "Take it off."

Turke walked over to the other chair, sat down beside Rupp and pulled off his left boot. There was a small worn spot in the sole.

ERNIE took the boot and went over to his stool. "I'll have it ready in a jiffy."

His feeling was strong that these two tough-looking riders were connected with the mysterious deck of cards, though so far they had said and done nothing to confirm his suspicion. Ernie was conscious of nervousness as he set to work, and his jittery feeling made him half angry.

Spence Turke set his unbooted heel on a rung of the chair and tilted back against the wall. Rupp, rolling a cigarette, kept watching Ernie with sharp black eyes. Ernie felt uncomfortable, knowing the two men were behind him, and his glance kept sliding over toward the crude drawer under the bench where he had put his .41 revolver.

He fitted a patch to the worn sole, inwardly cursing his nervousness. Neither of these men had

threatened him by word or look, and he had no proof that they had taken the deck of cards off the bench. But he was sure that one of them *had* taken it. He wished he had his gun, but it didn't seem wise to get it just now.

"Ain't you takin' a long time patchin' that boot?" Turke asked at last.

Ernie put down his hammer and turned around on the stool.

"I'm done now," he said, and tossed the boot on the floor in front of Turke's chair.

"That's good," Turke said. He let his chair legs thump the floor and reached for the boot. "That extra hoss out there's for you," he said casually. "The boss told us to bring you along."

Ernie glanced quickly at the drawer which held his gun. For a moment panic gripped him. He fought for control, and forced himself to be calm. His voice seemed easy and quiet.

"The boss? Who's that? What's he want with me?"

Rupp dropped his cigarette to the floor, rubbed it out with his foot and lifted his black glance to Ernie's face. "Maybe you'll know why he wants you when we tell you who he is. He's Brad Harris."

Ernie stared; then he shook his head slowly. "I don't know any Brad Harris. Never heard of 'im."

"You found an ace of diamonds here, didn't you?" Turke demanded.

Ernie nodded.

"Well, then," Turke went on, "you know what that means. Stallin' ain't gettin' you nothin' Me and Wing just work for Brad, and he said bring you to him unless you put up a fight. If you put up a fight—"

His low, harsh voice died away as Sheriff Jasper Kerner stepped into the doorway.

"You busy, Bellinger?" Kerner asked. "I'll stop some other time. I just—"

He broke off, frowning. Ernie, drumming with his fingertips on the workbench, saw Kerner's sleepy-looking eyes brighten and grow narrow. He knew that the sheriff was listening, trying to read the desperate message of Ernie's crude telegraphy. Ernie didn't know how much Kerner would be able to catch, but maybe he would get enough of it.

The lawman's glance shifted suddenly toward Turke and Rupp. Turke was staring at the star on Kerner's vest. Rupp was still looking at Ernie.

Turke stood up, stamped his foot into his boot and said: "Reckon we'd better be ridin'."

SHERIFF KERNER was watching the two men steadily now. "You fellows better keep your eyes open," he said finally. "Brad Harris escaped from the pen last month, and he's apt to be hidin' out in this country somewhere. I—"

Stuart Conklin had paused on the sidewalk in front of the doorway. His sunken eyes stared into the shop, and he leaned heavily on his cane. His voice was a croak:

"What's that you say? Brad Harris—"

The sheriff did not turn, but he seemed to recognize the voice. "Brad Harris escaped. They ain't caught him yet."

Conklin swayed, caught himself and leaned against the door casing. His lined face turned toward Turke, who was moving toward the door.

"We'll keep our eyes peeled, sheriff," Rupp promised. He flung a glance at Ernie. "We'll see you again, mister." He followed Turke

to the door, and they crowded past Conklin.

Ernie smiled. "One of you gents must have picked up my deck of cards," he drawled. "It was on the bench here—with the ace of diamonds turned up."

Conklin uttered a low, choked cry, and his gray face twisted in an expression of agony. Before Ernie or the sheriff could move toward him, he crumpled down across the door sill.

Kerner sprang toward him. "What—"

"Pain must have hit him," Ernie said. "Looks as if he's fainted."

They carried the old man inside and put him on a cot at the rear of the shop. In the excitement Rupp and Turke mounted and rode away, leading the spare horse. Ernie remembered, then, that he hadn't collected his fee for repairing Turke's boot.

CONKLIN opened his eyes. He turned his head to look wildly around the room; then tried to rise.

Ernie pushed him back on the cot. "Take it easy," he said. "You'll be all right."

Conklin dropped his head to the pillow. His breathing was heavy, and the wildness lingered in his eyes.

Sheriff Kerner, who had been standing behind Ernie, tapped him on the shoulder with a forefinger. He jerked a thumb toward the front door, turned and strode outside. Ernie followed.

The lawman was waiting on the sidewalk. A frown rode his brow, and his dark eyes were narrowed in thought.

"Look," he said in a low tone. "Conklin's scared. He heard me say Brad Harris had escaped. If those two fellows really aimed to take you to Harris, maybe it was because you bought this place from Conklin. See the point?"

"Who *is* Brad Harris?"

"Killer and bank robber. Caught and sent up about ten years ago for life. He escaped a month ago and hasn't been heard of since. You keep an eye on Conklin while I go and look up the Harris case."

Ernie went back inside the shop. He saw that Conklin was lying quietly with eyes closed, and went over to the drawer under the bench. Drawing the .41 revolver out of the holster, he slipped it under the waistband of his pants.

He crossed the room and stood beside the cot. Conklin opened his eyes.

"What happened to you?" Ernie asked.

"I don't know," answered Conklin weakly. "Everything went black."

Ernie stared down at the gray face. "Do you know anything about the ace of diamonds?"

Conklin's face twisted. His left hand knotted into a fist. "No, no!"

Ernie carried one of the chairs over beside the cot and sat down. "Maybe you'd better tell me what you know about Brad Harris," he suggested.

Conklin's lips moved soundlessly for a moment before words came. "I . . . I don't know him."

"All right," Ernie said. "We'll let it go at that." He settled back on his chair. "How do you feel now?"

"Better."

"You need to rest, though," Ernie told him. "You'd better stay here tonight."

Fear came into Conklin's eyes. He rolled his head on the pillow. "No, no, not tonight. This is your bed."

"That's all right," Ernie assured

him. "I won't need it. I seldom sleep here."

"But I must go home."

"There's nobody there to take care of you, and you're not well."

"I haven't been well for years," Conklin said bitterly. "I'll get along."

Ernie shrugged. "Suit yourself."

CONKLIN had gone, and Ernie was sitting on the edge of the cot when Sheriff Kerner returned at sunset. For greater comfort, Ernie had taken his gun out from under his waistband and put it on the cot at his side, and his hand leaped to it when Kerner stepped into the doorway. Recognizing his visitor, Ernie dropped the gun with a wry laugh.

Sheriff Kerner's dark eyes took in the gun, then shifted for a glance around the room. "Where's Conklin?"

"Went home."

Kerner sat down on Ernie's stool at the workbench. He put both broad hands on his knees and leaned forward.

"Ten years ago Brad Harris had a gang," he said, "and it seems as if one of his pards betrayed him to the law. I've been doin' some investigatin', and I reckon Stuart Conklin's the man that done it. Harris aims to get Conklin. You've been ramroddin' this shop about a month, and Harris done *his* investigatin' a little before that, when Conklin was here." The sheriff paused to take a cigar out of his vest pocket and bite the end off. "Harris thinks Conklin's still the cobbler, and when he sent Turke and Rupp after *him*, they found *you*. They thought you was the man they wanted."

Ernie frowned. "Maybe you're right. But how does the ace of diamonds come in?"

"I don't know, exactly," admitted Kerner. "Must have been Harris' way of tellin' Conklin what was up. When Conklin heard about it, he was scared plenty, anyhow."

"That must be how it is," Ernie agreed. "I'm expectin' those fellows back."

Kerner nodded. "I reckon. But when?"

"Wish I knew." Ernie studied the rough floor thoughtfully.

The sheriff struck a match on the edge of the bench, lit his cigar and blew a cloud of smoke. He spoke reflectively: "I got to lay a trap for Brad Harris, and he won't take it kindly, I reckon."

Ernie picked up his gun and shunted a glance at the front door. Evening shadows were reaching across the street.

"I'd hate for anything to happen to old man Conklin," he said slowly, "but I'd hate worse for anything to happen to me."

Kerner puffed his cigar. "I been thinkin'. If those boys do come back and try to take you to Harris' hide-out, maybe you'd better just go along with 'em. When Harris sees you, he'll know you ain't the right man. And if I could follow you, you'd lead me right to Harris. See?"

Ernie chuckled. "Yeah, I see. But when Harris found out he had the wrong man, he wouldn't let me go. He'd figure I knew too much, and I reckon he don't mind a little killing now and then." He stood up and tucked the .41 revolver under the waistband of his pants.

"Where you goin'?" The sheriff got to his feet and looked at Ernie expectantly.

Ernie grinned. "If Brad Harris and his gunmen are going to be looking for me here, I don't want to be here when they come. Reckon I'll go over and see how Conklin is."

ERNIE stopped at the restaurant for supper, and darkness came while he was eating. Afterward, he stood on the sidewalk for about ten minutes and looked up and down the dark street. He was still wondering why the ace of diamonds had been left on his workbench, and why mention of it had upset Conklin so badly. Until this afternoon, Ernie thought, he had never heard of Brad Harris, and now he was too much afraid of the escaped convict to stay in his own shop.

Realizing this, he was angry with himself, and he gritted his teeth until the muscles corded in his lean, angular jaw. He kept his right thumb hooked under his waistband near the butt of his gun, and he listened for the clatter of hoofs which would herald the approach of riders. He didn't intend to go to the hide-out of Brad Harris.

He saw nothing in the dark street except an occasional passerby, and presently he stepped off the sidewalk and moved over the dust and paused again on the other side of the street. Light glowed in the doorways of a couple of saloons. Four or five horses were tied up in front of each. Nearby, all the buildings except the restaurant were closed, and reflected light glinted from dark windowpanes.

Ernie's own door was closed and locked; and the still form of Jasper Kerner stood in front of it, the red eye of light on the end of his cigar making a rising and falling glow in the darkness as the sheriff puffed. This was a peaceful town, and the law was on the alert, but Ernie Bellinger still felt uneasy. Menace seemed to lurk in every dark corner.

Ernie walked past the hotel and turned into the cross street. He strode swiftly past a long row of dark houses and was almost beyond the town when he slackened his pace. Stuart Conklin's house was in front of him, and Ernie's nerves hummed with tension. There was a light burning in one of the front rooms, but the cobbler felt a strange reluctance about going ahead.

He turned and looked back. Three men were walking abreast down the middle of the street. They were making so little noise that they were already close, and Ernie hadn't heard them. He turned sidewise, hooked his thumb under his waistband again, and waited for them to pass.

The men came on steadily, the dust muffling the sound of their boots. They were not talking; and in the darkness, Ernie could see them only as black, moving shadows, almost without form.

They came abreast of Ernie and passed on. Apparently they had not noticed him. Ernie's held breath came out in a gust of relief, and his hand fell away from his gun.

Then, with startling suddenness, the dark forms wheeled and closed in. A sharp voice ripped the silence:

"Reach high! Quick!"

Too late, Ernie realized that these men were Spence Turke, Wing Rupp —and Brad Harris himself. They had followed him from the main street.

Ernie was not a split-second gunman, nor an especially good shot; but now fear surged through him and put his muscles into involuntary action. Wheeling sidewise, he reached for his gun.

The three men whirled in upon him. Ernie gave back a pace; his hand caught the butt of his double-action gun, jerked the barrel free of his waistband, tilted the muzzle up. Harris and his two pards swarmed at him, seeming to make one solid mass

in front of him. Ernie's finger pressed the trigger.

The gun gave off a blasting roar, and a spurt of flame licked at the darkness.

Ernie thought he heard somebody grunt, and he tried to duck away from his charging enemies. Then the smack of a gun barrel against the side of his head knocked him to his knees, dazed, and a strong hand wrenched his gun away.

A light flared briefly as one of the men thumbed a match. Ernie heard a muttered oath, then the match went out.

"Blast it!" a harsh voice rasped. "That ain't Conklin. Reckon he still lives where he did, and I see a light. We'll take this bucko along. Come on."

Strong hands jerked Ernie to his feet and forced him to walk along.

CONSCIOUS of little else but his splitting headache, Ernie stumbled along toward Conklin's house. Brad Harris and his two pards were close behind him, and as Ernie's head cleared, his fear grew. Once he tried to run, tripped and fell, and he heard Harris cursing harshly in a low monotone. Exerting all his strength, Ernie got up and went on.

In front of the house, one of the trio stopped Ernie and another man tried the door. It was locked.

"Want me to knock?" the man asked, and Ernie recognized Wing Rupp's voice.

"No," said Harris. "Lemme think."

They all gathered into a tight group with Ernie in the middle. The cobbler's strength was returning now, and his wiry muscles had lost their numbness. His head cleared, but the pain stayed.

"I can't fool around here long," Harris growled. "Oughtn't to be here now, but you jaspers didn't seem to be gettin' hold of Conklin, and I sure aim to pay him off for turnin' against me. I ain't forgettin' the nine years I rotted in Yuma." He paused, and seemed to be staring at the lighted window. "Come on. We'll bust the door down and drag the yeller coyote out."

They started toward the door, and stopped when Ernie said hoarsely: "Conklin's an old man, Harris. He's all bent over with rheumatism. Isn't that punishment enough?"

"No!" A fierce, savage note crept into Harris' low voice. "I aim to pay him off, and I aim for him to know it's me doin' it. Now keep your yap shut."

They went on to the door, the evil-faced Turke holding Ernie's arm. Harris tried the door. When he had made sure that it really was locked he backed off and charged ahead. His broad shoulder struck the panel and the door shivered. Backing away, Harris tucked his head down and tried again. He was a big man, hard as nails, and his shoulder drove forward like a battering-ram.

The door broke loose from its fastenings and crashed inward, and Harris landed on hands and knees on top of the wreckage. He was up in an instant and headed for the inside door, under which a streak of light showed.

Wing Rupp leaped through the doorway, and Turke pushed Ernie in. It was dark inside this room, but an instant later Brad Harris flung open the inner door and light seeped in from the other room.

THROUGH the doorway, Ernie could see a bed in the far corner; and near the foot of the bed, in an old rocking chair, Stuart Conklin sat stiffly upright, his gray face

turned toward the door and his good left hand leveling a pistol at Brad Harris.

"What do you want, Ace?" Conklin demanded in a quavery voice. "Get out."

Brad Harris had a broad face, with a blunt nose and square chin. A three-day growth of black beard darkened his cheeks and jaws. He carried two guns belted around his thick middle. A splash of blood showed on his left sleeve, where Ernie's bullet had nicked him.

"I swore I'd get you, Conklin," Harris snarled. "I'm goin' to do it. Drop that gun."

Stuart Conklin's face twisted as if with pain. He said thinly: "These nine years have served me worse than they have served you, Ace. You aimed to double-cross me. I just beat you to it."

"Drop that gun," Brad Harris repeated. He took a step forward, but stopped when Conklin tilted the pistol a little higher. "Fightin' won't help you any. I got two men with me."

Wing Rupp passed Turke and Ernie and crowded through the doorway behind Brad Harris. He moved sidewise along the wall, out of Ernie's sight.

Conklin tried to turn so that he could watch Rupp, but a spasm of pain caught him, and he couldn't make it. Rupp was sidling along the wall, to get behind Conklin, Ernie knew. If he did that, the old man wouldn't have a chance.

"Lay that gun down," Harris said, a triumphant note in his voice. "We'll take care of you and this young feller who's workin' in your shop. He knows too much about me now."

A surge of anger gripped Ernie and he acted without thought. He spun around, and his fist lashed out at Turke's head. He felt the blow land solidly, saw Turke stagger

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back. Then, forgetting the pain in his head and the odds against him, Ernie jumped straight at Turke before the gunman could recover.

Ernie's right hand reached desperately toward the butt of his own .41 sticking above Turke's belt. His fingers caught the weapon and jerked it free, and he spun sidewise just in time to avoid Turke's haymaker.

The gunman, missing his blow, lunged past Ernie, pulled up almost in the doorway and wheeled around. Ernie saw Turke's right-hand gun leave the holster, saw the muzzle swinging up, and he caught a glimpse of the gunman's snarling, evil face. He stepped quickly to the left.

Turke's gun crashed, and the lead caught Ernie in the thigh. He sat down suddenly and hard, but he kept his gun muzzle up. Turke shoved his gun out and took a crouching step forward. It was then that Ernie pulled trigger.

The lead smacked the outlaw full in the chest, and Ernie rolled away and sat up again, facing the inner doorway. Suddenly he became aware of the thunder of shots in the other room.

BRAD HARRIS, crouched, a gun in each hand, was shooting at somebody Ernie couldn't see. If it was old man Conklin, he was mighty hard to kill, and he was shooting back mighty fast. Wing Rupp, his gun gone and both arms pressed against his stomach, reeled across the room into Ernie's range of vision and fell just behind Conklin's chair.

Ernie looked at Spence Turke's body and put his left hand on his own wounded thigh. He brought the hand away wet with blood. He tried to get up, but found the effort too much for him and aimed his gun at Harris' back, there in the doorway. When he spoke the sound of his voice startled him.

"Harris!" he called. "Let the old man alone."

His voice carried through the crash of gunfire, and Brad Harris wheeled sidewise and swung his right-hand gun toward Ernie. Somebody in the other room, beyond Harris, continued to shoot, and a slug caught the convict and twisted his big body around against the door casing.

Ernie held his fire and watched Harris slide down to a sitting position. The convict's head lolled forward, and his hands lay loose and lifeless. He was already dead.

Ernie crawled into the doorway beside Harris' body just in time to see Sheriff Jasper Kerner climb through a side window. The lawman crossed the room and looked down at the body of Stuart Conklin huddled in the rocker.

"Poor devil," he said. "Stopped Wing Rupp's slug first thing." He came on to the doorway. "You hurt, Bellinger?"

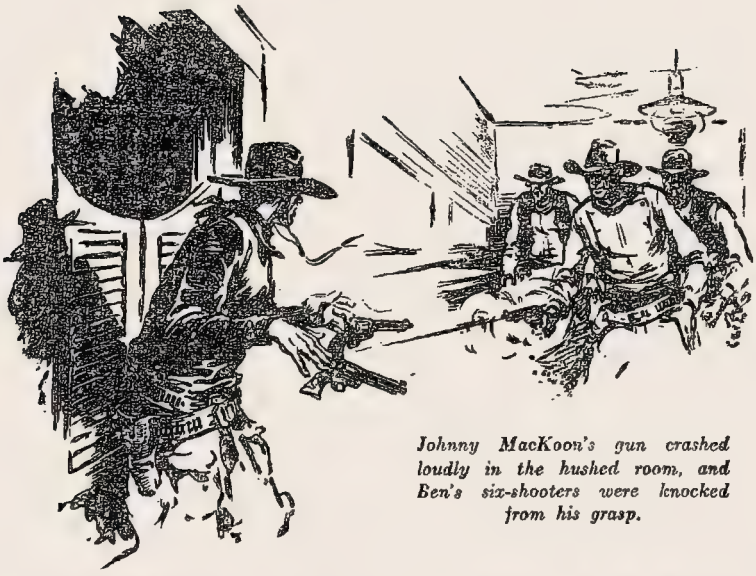
Ernie managed a grin. "I'll live. How'd you get here?"

"Followed Harris and the other two hombres," Kerner explained. "I saw 'em followin' you. The side window wasn't locked, so I got it open and did my shootin' through it." He looked down at the dead outlaw. "While you were eatin' supper, I found a fellow that remembered about Harris, so now I know what the ace of diamonds meant. Harris used a different name back when he had a gang."

"Yeah?" Ernie stared up at the sheriff. "What was it?"

Kerner's smile was grim. "Why—Ace Diamond, of course."

THE END



Johnny MacKoon's gun crashed loudly in the hushed room, and Ben's six-shooters were knocked from his grasp.

THREE DAYS OF LAW

by ELI COLTER

The Devil asked a hard price for bringing those two together—and sent a posse from Hades to collect

CHAPTER I

THE GUNMAN

It was an ordinary night in Pawnee Bill's emporium and saloon. There was nothing to warn any man in the room, nothing to indicate in the slightest manner that the little cow town of Mesa, Arizona, was about to be plunged into the grimmest and bloodiest days it had ever known. Right now, it was quiet enough to lull any bunch of cowhands and town loafers into a false sense of peace and security.

It wasn't even Saturday night or the end of the month; then the click of chips on the poker table, the tinkle of glasses on the bar would have been more lively. It was Wednesday evening. Soapy Lee, the pint-size bartender with the handle-bar mustache, swiped an imaginary speck off the mahogany. Over at the poker table, Horseface MacKoon, who had dropped into town for supplies and stayed over to indulge in a little penny ante, leered mockingly at his foreman Hank Wolford, raised the pot a dime and

raked in the pot. The tariff had proved too heavy for MacKoon's top hand, Roy Wheeler, and for Skink LeFevre, the town gossip and good-for-nothing.

George Horace and a couple of cowboys from the G Bar H ranch stood at the far end of the bar, drinking a last beer preparatory to hitting for home.

There was no one else in the saloon. A few men, a hot night and an ordinary midweek pastime in a law-abiding cow town. Then the explosion.

Over at the poker table, Hank Wolford suddenly held a gun-filled fist above the checkered-oilcloth table and glared at Skink LeFevre. "There's somethin' sneaky goin' on around here," Wolford barked. "And it ain't Roy, and it ain't the boss. Your deal, as I remember, Skink. Blast you, I'll gut-shoot you if you're dealin' from the bottom."

George Horace and his two punchers didn't pay any attention. It was nothing new for someone to accuse Skink of a sneak play. Most people had a hunch that Skink was a cheater though nobody had ever caught him at it. Somebody was always trying to pin him down.

Skink made his usual whining protest: "Now, Hank! You ain't got no call to accuse me of tinkerin' with the deal, just because I'm in debt to Mr. MacKoon and you think I want to git on the good side of him. That ain't fair."

MacKoon spoke up: "Well, if you *are* pulling something phoney, Skink, don't ever let *me* catch you at it."

Soapy Lee glanced across the bar toward MacKoon. Everybody in Mesa and for a radius of a hundred miles around knew Horseface MacKoon. That long narrow face of his, with the prominent jaw and big white teeth that flashed at the slightest word he spoke, was a familiar sight from one end of the range to the other. He had the big brown eyes of a horse, good-natured eyes with a shine in them. He was not only known for that long equine face of his and his big tremendously powerful body, not only for his habitual tolerance and decency toward his fellow ranchers; he was known best for his brother Ben.

BEN MACKOON was legend in the farthest reaches of Mesa Range for three reasons: one, he was Horseface MacKoon's kid brother; two, he was all the family Horseface had in the world; three, Horseface hadn't ever seen his kid brother Ben. The explanation was simple. The MacKoon family, every existing member of it, Horseface's mother, his father, his grandparents on his father's side (his mother's parents were dead), his three uncles and two aunts and their families, had all come across the plains in a wagon train together. That is, they had come part way across the plains before the Indians caught them. The only two people left alive out of that massacre were Horseface and his mother. You couldn't yet count the brother that hadn't been born.

But Horseface's mother had hugged to the ground, both her arms around Horseface, taking the arrows that were meant for them both. The cavalry got there in time to keep her and Horseface alive. The soldiers got them both to the post and got Mrs. MacKoon to a doctor. Some friends of the MacKoons, coming along the next week in another wagon train, took little Horseface along with them out of sheer charity and agreed to bring him up. For his mother had died the day before of her wounds. Horseface didn't know

till over a year later that she had left behind her another boy, a boy named Ben. Nobody had said anything to the people in the wagon train about the baby Ben when the people took Horseface with them. No one had thought little Ben would live.

But he did live. And another wagon train came along. And in it was a woman who had just lost her own child, so she took little Ben with a prayer of thankfulness. The doctor wrote these things to the people who took Horseface, when they wrote to ask whether the baby Ben had ever lived. The woman who took Ben hadn't even given her name.

Horseface was eight years old then. So he grew up, knowing that all the family he had was a kid brother he had never seen, seven years younger than he was, named Ben.

And here he was, kingpin of the Mesa cattle range, up in his thirties and doing well by himself and everybody he knew, but he had never ceased hankering for the companionship of his kid brother, and he had never ceased trying to find the lost Ben. Neither had he ever got the slightest clue to the probable whereabouts of Ben MacKoon till within the last two years. The wagon train that had brought Ben out had landed in Wyoming. And a Ben MacKoon had come to light in Wyoming a couple of years ago, a Ben MacKoon who had been brought up partly by foster parents who had died. This Ben had since then brought himself up in a wild and lawless frontier, his own parents having been killed in the massacre of a wagon train.

It wouldn't seem there could be any doubt that here was the lost kid brother of Horseface MacKoon. Everybody on Mesa range believed it, even Horseface himself. But for the last two years Horseface's lifelong hunt had sort of hung fire, and nobody around Mesa wanted to locate Ben MacKoon very badly. Because Ben MacKoon had come into the limelight for one lone reason: he was a "wanted" deadly killer with a price on his head.

And Skink LeFevre, the town gossip and good-for-nothing loafer of Mesa, had done more than his share to spread every known detail of Ben MacKoon's arrest in Wyoming and his subsequent daring escape from jail. Horseface hadn't blamed him any; Horseface said that Skink's tongue was tied in the middle and loose at both ends and he guessed it couldn't help flopping. But it didn't make him like Skink any better.

All of the men in Pawnee Bill's place were thinking of Ben MacKoon and Skink's loose tongue and of the money Horseface had lent Skink to keep Skink himself out of jail for petty thievery, as Horseface called Skink to account there at the poker table, on the heels of Hank Wolford's accusation that Skink had been dealing from the bottom.

THEY had made just enough noise between them so that they hadn't heard the slight noises from outside. They hadn't heard a horse walk up to the hitching rack and stop. They hadn't heard the characterless thud of some inert burden being dropped on the boardwalk outside the swing doors of the saloon, nor the light quick approach of booted feet on the boardwalk. They didn't know the man was there till he stepped inside the swing doors and halted and stood there looking at them.

They knew he was there then, all right, and all the men in the room,

just as if somebody had barked an order at them, caught their breath and went still, staring back at the man who had come so suddenly in out of the hot dark night.

He was a little above average height, a trifle on the slim side. He was dressed in black from head to foot: dusty black boots, black bull-hide chaps over black dungarees, black shirt and black hat. A lock of lank black hair drooped from under the hat and swept down over a high forehead, plastered there by sweat. His eyes were the color of blue-black ink.

He stood there for fully fifteen seconds, surveying the men in the room intently, as if he were weighing them and their temper, their apparent mettle and their capacity for making trouble. His hands weren't on the butts of the two black guns he wore in tied-down holsters, but anybody knew he could whip the guns up faster than the eye could travel. None of them had ever seen him before, yet they all knew who he was as unerringly as if he had worn a name label in letters an inch high. They couldn't have told how they knew. It was just one of those things.

But they weren't going to call him by name, and they didn't want him to find out that they knew—not a killer as cold and deadly as he had proved himself to be, only about three jumps ahead of the law that wanted him badly enough to offer four thousand dollars for him dead or alive. That was only a secondary consideration, however; the main thing was the fact that this man was something Horseface MacKoon had been hunting for a lot of years, and that he was Horseface's business, not theirs. They weren't starting anything; but they were ready to back any play Horseface made, down to their last chip. So they stood there like wooden men, with narrowed eyes and bated breath, waiting.

SO did Horseface MacKoon. He stood there with his big shining eyes staring at that cold-faced killer, but he didn't see the man in black. He saw something he could never forget as long as he was above six feet of dirt: he saw racing horses and howling Indians, and his mother's left hand tight upon his own crossed hands. He saw his mother's right thumb sticking up in front of his right eye, the rest of her fingers clamped upon his mouth. There was an arrow clear through her hand, and the point of it scratched his chin. As long as he lived, he would see the shaft of that arrow waving faintly before his face.

And the ghost of that arrow lay like a sign across the forehead of the man in black, a long white scar, flat and straight as an arrow's shaft, reaching from the outer tip of his left eyebrow to the edge of his black hair above his right eye.

When he saw that nobody else was going to speak first, the stranger stirred, walked up to the bar and said to Soapy Lee: "Whiskey, straight." His voice was gentle and pleasant, almost apologetic. Soapy Lee set out bottle and glass, and the gunman glanced around the other men in the room. His gentle pleasant voice said: "Won't you gents drink with me? I'd be plumb honored to have you join me."

For another long-drawn instant there was blank silence, and no man made any sound, because they were all waiting to see what Horseface MacKoon would do. Horseface had come to his feet like a puppet on a string, when the black-haired man came in the door. Hank Wolford was already on his feet. Roy

Wheeler and Skink LeFevre both got up too, now, and stood there behind Horseface, motionless, waiting.

Hank Wolford started to pick up his gun, which he had laid on the table; but instead he jerked his hands back as if the gun butt had suddenly grown red-hot. The black-haired gunman smiled, and the smile, gentle and pleasant like his voice, even seemed to melt a little of the ice from his blue-black eyes.

"Slide it back in leather, friend," Ben said. "What makes you think I'd care?"

Hank nodded, picked up the gun and dropped it back where it belonged.

Horseface moved a hand before his eyes, as if he were wiping away some vision he alone saw and did not want to see, and he said as he started toward the bar: "Blood's thicker'n water, that ain't no lie. Sure we'll drink with you. Belly up to the bar, boys. It might never happen again."

CHAPTER II

THE WINDY

THEY all knew what he meant, all but the black-haired outlaw. He didn't know. But the others all knew that Horseface was saying in other words that now, while they were yet strangers, before the word had been spoken that would definitely reveal Ben MacKoon as their enemy because he was an enemy of the law, they could drink with him. A stranger could drink with a stranger.

They moved up to the bar with Horseface and ranged along the bar beside George Horace and the two punchers from the G Bar H, and said that what the stranger was having was good enough for them. Soapy Lee set out more bottles and glasses. When the glasses had been filled, the stranger raised his own and said lightly: "Here's mud in your eye."

The whiskey was swallowed down the bar. Horseface said: "Now you drink with me, stranger. Fill 'em up, everybody." The boys filled 'em up, and they were all thinking what Horseface had said a minute ago, how it might never happen again. He might never again be able to drink with his brother, standing there looking with a smile upon the man he had sought so many years, knowing that man for a feared outlaw, but keeping the knowledge to himself until he could have the satisfaction of standing and speaking and drinking with his brother face to face. It might never happen again. They all drank, and nobody said anything. This was Horseface's show. They were leaving it to Horseface.

The gunman set down his glass with a thud, and his black eyes held a little bluer glint as he stared intently at Horseface. "What was that crack you made about blood being thicker than water? And what was the idea anyway?"

Had Horseface MacKoon been looking upon the stranger merely as the deadly outlaw, enemy of the law and all law-abiding men, he would have kept his distance, wary as a cat, ready to whip up his own gun at the first sign of danger. But Horseface wasn't thinking about the outlaw; he was thinking of his kid brother Ben that had been born when his mother died of her arrow wounds. And his sight was too clouded by those old memories to see anything in this black-garbed black-haired man but that baby grown up into a man who should have been a comrade and friend.

So Horseface MacKoon did some-

thing that made every other man in the dead-still room of Pawnee Bill's saloon gasp and hold his breath; and some of them backed a step before they caught themselves and halted, frozen to startled immobility.

Horseface stepped up to the black-eyed outlaw, laid one arm across the hard wide shoulders under the black shirt and looked down into the dark cold face and said quietly: "Why, I'm your brother, Ben. I wouldn't expect you to know me, but I've been huntin' you for a lot of years."

The outlaw didn't move. He stared back at Horseface with widened gaze, and replied with a kind of subdued violence: "My brother? My *brother!* Gad, that's a new one. Who you trying to hooraw? I haven't got any brother."

"Oh, yes you have," said Horseface. "You've got me. You mean to tell me them people that took you to raise, any of 'em, never told you about me? Ma and me was the only ones saved out of that slaughter, and I wouldn't have come out of it if she hadn't been hunkered down there with both arms around me " and Horseface went on to give a graphic account of that day he could never forget. "And when I got old enough to understand and tried to find you, there wasn't no trace of you anywhere," he finished. "Though that never stopped me from goin' right on trying."

THE outlaw still didn't move, but the expression of his dark face changed. His black eyes lost their bluish gleam and narrowed, mocking, glittering. His face a map of contempt, his low-pitched voice was scathing with derision: "Pretty good, Johnny, but that ain't the way I heard it. The way I heard it, Ben MacKoon was farmed out to some folks in Wyoming, after his foster parents died. He had a hard life, breaking horses, skinning coyotes and shooting snakes, but it was a pretty good life and he had enough to eat. He was getting along—nothing to complain about."

"If you didn't know about me," Horseface cut in suspiciously, "How did you know my name was Johnny?"

"Is it?" The expression on the dark face didn't change. "It's a common name, Johnny is. But I was telling you this windy about Ben MacKoon. As I said, he was getting along good, nothing to complain of, when a double-crossing pal of his got into trouble. Robbed a pack train, killed two miners and landed in it up to his neck. Then this pal got scared stiff. He was no owlhooter—just a fool kid that thought there was easier ways of living than working for it, so scared that he didn't know what he was doing. He saw that he could frame Ben MacKoon for it, and he laid the trap around Ben cold. Ben didn't have a chance, he knew it. If he stayed there, he'd hang higher than Hogan."

"Why didn't he duck?" demanded Horseface. He was still standing there with his arm across his brother's shoulder, listening intently and looking down with a frown into the outlaw's face.

"Duck? He did," answered Ben MacKoon. "That's *just* what he did. He lit out between sunset and sunrise, and his double-crossing pal led the chase after him. But—they never caught him, you understand. He kept going. He killed off a couple of back trailers that would have turned him in, and the law set a price on his head. He held up a dinky backwoods store or two to get a few grub supplies, and the price on his head grew. He's still duck-

ing, and the price is still growing. And the double-crossing pal, all the foolishness scared out of him, has stayed right there walking the straight and narrow, as ace-high and law-abiding a citizen as you'd ever want to see. Now, my friend," the outlaw's voice slowed to a biting drawl, "there's a mark for you to shoot at. There's a windy with guts. Until you can produce one as worthy of—"

Down the bar, George Horace suddenly straightened and broke into the outlaw's acidic drawl with a mockery that matched it. "That ain't no windy. That's genoo-wine as gospel. No man was ever that gosh-awful bitter about the wildest windy as ever was."

The outlaw started and stared, and for the first time he looked what he was, a harried and frightened kid, for all his twenty-six years. He said unbelievingly: "Well, for cryin' in my whiskers! Somebody that really knows the truth when he hears it!" He looked up at the long heavy-jawed countenance of Horseface. "Is it—are you—Johnny, is what you just said as true as what I told?"

"Every word of it, kid." Horseface's voice rose, and he looked around the room at the seven men who had been his friends for a lot of years. "We're going to pull him out of this jackpot he's in pronto, boys. We're going to—"

Ben interrupted, his voice gone hard and cold again, that defiant mask of chill and detachment again on his dark face. He stepped back, away from the long arm of Horseface MacKoon, and someway he managed to widen a black gulf between himself and them all. He said curtly: "It's too late. Until an hour ago, it wouldn't have been. I was still in the clear, I hadn't ever taken from any man any more than I needed to keep on living, I hadn't burned down any man who wasn't a worse owlhooter than I was. But it's too late, now."

Horseface spoke sharply. "What you done, kid?"

Ben raised one hand and shoved back the long black lock plastered against his cheek by sweat. His low-pitched tone was a trifle hoarse. "I've killed my first officer of the law, the sheriff. He had me cornered. And after I'd managed to get this far from the old home ranch, too, hoping I could leave the whole mess behind me if I went far enough! The sheriff got me with my back to the wall. I wasn't going to swing now. I let him have it. He's laying out there on the sidewalk in front of the saloon."

CHAPTER III

THE SHERIFF

HORSEFACE looked out the window into the hot black night, avoiding the gaze of everybody else. He'd give about anything he possessed to save Ben, but he couldn't see any way out of this. After all, a sheriff was a sheriff and when you killed him he was dead, and there wasn't much anybody could do about that.

George Horace broke the silence: "We might's well bring him in before anybody else comes along and gits a squint at him." George started for the door, and his two punchers fell in behind. Roy Wheeler went along with them.

Hank Wolford said suddenly: "There ain't no hole so deep a fellow can't git out of it."

Ben MacKoon looked at him. "Yes there is—and it's only three feet wide and six feet deep."

The swing doors squeaked a little as Horace and the two G Bar H

punchers and Roy Wheeler went through, and the *scuff-scuff* of their boot soles sounded loud on the board walk.

Horseface Johnny MacKoon looked at his kid brother hard. "Is there anything for you as much as there is ag'in you in this? Did he fire on you without warning or anything?"

The black-haired outlaw shook his head. "No. I haven't got a leg to stand on. I knew he was the sheriff. He said so. He ordered me to halt, or he'd shoot. I let him have it, then I went back and picked him up, hoping maybe he might be alive. But he wasn't. I hit what I aim at, and I aimed to stop him."

"What did you bring him here for?" Horseface demanded.

The outlaw looked slightly disconcerted for an instant, almost sheepish. "Trying to find a doctor. Hoping maybe I could be wrong, and that there might be a flicker of life left in him somewhere."

"Well, there ain't," said the voice of George Horace, and the swing doors squeaked again as he shoved them open. "Just between you'n me, Ben, he's dead as dirt. I don't know what we're going to do." George advanced into the room, and the three punchers came behind him, carrying the body of the sheriff, which they laid down there before the bar in the sawdust and stepped back.

WORDLESSLY, Soapy set out another round of drinks, making a vague sign that this one was on the house. The men accepted the drink in the same wordless silence, looking down at the dead face of the man of law and the star that glimmered on his chest. None of them knew the sheriff very well. Mesa was a law-abiding town, and they didn't have need of law dogs very often. These men had seen him only two or three times since he'd been elected a couple of years ago. They didn't even know his name, more than that he was called, with reason, Single-shot Andy. He was just the sheriff. But now he became of importance to Mesa, because he was dead and because of the way he was dead.

That was the perfect time for Skink LeFevre to horn in, and he did it. Skink cocked an eye first at the dead sheriff, then at the dark expressionless face and cold black eyes of Ben MacKoon. Skink said, with his usual insolent carelessness: "Bumpin' off the sheriff! Of all things! Been a lot more sense to it if you'd plugged the gent that done the framin' two years ago."

Hank Wolford glared at him. "Shut up, Skink. Every time you open your big mouth, you make trouble for somebody."

Horseface frowned. "Ben, who was this one-time pal of yours that done the framing?"

"Gill Bruedor, owner of the Bar N Bar," Ben answered indifferently with an impatient side glance for Skink LeFevre. "Him and his mother run the ranch. But Gill Bruedor is a thing of the past. The future is all I've got time to think about. I've just killed Sheriff Andy Grimes, and I've got to keep going." As quick as that, he had both guns out, covering the room. He started backing warily toward the door. "Don't move, and nobody'll get hurt. Sorry it had to end like this, Johnny. But I just didn't know in time."

Horseface said harshly: "Come back here, Ben! There's a way out somehow. Come back here!"

Ben shook his head. "No. Glad

I met you, Johnny—wish I'd met you two years ago."

HORSEFACE moved. Hank Wolford blinked and told himself afterward that Horseface Johnny MacKoon had never moved that fast before. Horseface himself never knew how he did it. But when he realized that he had to be speedy enough to stop Ben and his deadly guns both, he found his own gun leaping into his grip, crashing loudly in the hushed room, and he was almost as startled as his men to find that he could do it. The bullet knocked the gun out of Ben's right hand and cut a furrow through the flesh at the base of Ben's thumb. Ben's reaction was what any man's instinctive reaction would have been. He dropped his left-hand gun with an angry curse, and clapped his left hand around his numb and bleeding right hand. Horseface slammed his six-shooter back in its holster, took one long stride to Ben's side and gripped Ben's right arm hard. Ben glowered at him, white with fury, but Horseface ignored him and said to Hank Wolford:

"You boys tie him up and take him out to the ranch, lock him up and keep him there till I come back."

Roy Wheeler said: "Where you goin', boss?"

Horseface Johnny MacKoon didn't look at his irate kid brother. He looked, oddly, at Skink LeFevre. "I ain't sayin', Roy. But—I got business. It don't make no difference what Ben says, it plumb can't be that bad. There's something, I don't care what you call it; somewhere along the trail, that's got to be something workin' *for* Ben instead of against him. I'm going to find it."

"But where you goin' to start, boss?" asked Hank Wolford anxiously. "And how long you going to be gone? He *did* kill the sheriff, you know. We ain't going to be able to keep that dark very long."

"Yeah. Yeah," said Horseface slowly. "He killed the sheriff. That's right. But somewhere, somehow, something'll work for the kid. *All* the cards can't be stacked ag'in him all the way. Take him out to the ranch and wait till you hear from me. Bury the sheriff and keep your traps shut till you get word from me. You better take Skink out to the ranch and hold him, too, or he'll be runnin' off at the headfirst chance he gets."

"I ain't goin'—" Skink began indignantly.

Hank Wolford clamped a hand over his mouth. "The heck you ain't! Come on, boys. It's goin' to be near daylight before we git to the ranch, if we don't rattle our hocks."

Horseface said abruptly: "On second thought, I'll ride as far as the ranch with you. Just in case."

"I'm not goin' to make any trouble," Ben snapped. "What chance have I got to make a fight for it with a hand like that?"

"None, I reckon," Horseface answered, "if my aim's still good. Come on, we're wastin' time. I've got a lot of riding to do. Reckon we can't leave it all to Providence. We got to do a little hustling on our own hook."

CHAPTER IV

THE LAW

HORSEFACE MACKOON, self-appointed messenger of the law of recompense, left his home ranch the next morning just after daybreak and struck out on a beeline due north. MacKoon's ranch was in eastern Arizona near the New Mex-

ico line. His destination was in western Wyoming near the Idaho line. He traveled steadily, keeping an even gait and saving his horse, and in about the shortest time possible arrived at the Bar N Bar, rode into the ranch yard and said he was looking for a job. The foreman said he could use him, but the foreman never got a chance.

The next morning, Horseface walked up to Gill Bruedor over by the horse corral beyond the barn and said tersely: "Mr. Bruedor, some of the boys pointed you out to me. I'd admire to have you git your horse and ride out a little way with me where we could talk and not have anybody listening in. Andy Grimes sent me." He added as an after thought: "My name's John Mack."

Bruedor, a short man with sandy hair and pale hazel eyes, had a quick nervous way of speaking. He gave MacKoon a sharp worried glance and gnawed at his under lip an instant before he replied. Then he said with open impatience: "I wish he'd attend to his own affairs and let me alone. What does he want now?"

Horseface averted his gaze, to hide the triumph that leaped to his huge shining eyes. His voice was even when he answered: "I'd rather not talk about it here. Ain't there some place we can go for a few minutes?"

Bruedor scowled, pursed his mouth and gave in grudgingly. "I guess we could go into the house. If we don't—"

"I ain't goin' in the house where somebody could sneak up and listen," Horseface cut in. "I'm supposed to see you alone. If you don't want to talk to me alone, say so, and I'll go back and tell Andy you wasn't havin' any."

That got results. Bruedor said hastily: "You'd better not do that,

Hank and Ben lay on the ground between the two boulders and watched as the Dry Water men came to a halt in the gully bed.

Mack. Wait till I get my horse and we'll ride down a piece to that grove. Nobody'll be hanging around there."

He got his horse, they rode down the edge of the field to the grove, and Bruedor stopped his horse and said: "Well, we can talk here without danger of being overheard. Spit it out. What does Andy want?" He turned his head to glance at Horseface, and he looked straight into the bore of a big black gun.

Horseface MacKoon said: "Just keep ridin', Bruedor. Don't stop. Not till I tell you to."

Bruedor paled and started to sputter vehement protest. "Say, what's this all about? I don't like your—"

"And I don't like nothing about you at all!" snapped Horseface. "I don't like even having to ride with you, but we've got a bone to pick, you and me. Ride on, Bruedor!"

Bruedor rode on. He didn't say anything more, but the sweat began to roll down his pale nervous face, and his hands shook a little on the reins.

THE two of them kept going till there was a good five miles between them and the ranch line, and they were back deep in the hills before Horseface finally called a halt. "The quicker you do some fast clear talking," Horseface advised grimly, "that much quicker you can go back to your ranch, and I can go back to Arizona. I'm laying the cards down face up, and you can go on from there."

Bruedor wet his lips with his tongue, and his pale hazel eyes were wary and defiant. "I'm listening. What do you want to know?"

Horseface could see the dark pines behind Bruedor's head. They made Bruedor's white face look whiter. "Andy didn't send me, Bruedor. Andy's dead. I told you my name was John Mack, but that ain't all of it. In full, it's John MacKoon. I've got a brother Ben used to be a pal of yours, I understand. I guess I know pretty much the whole story, only I don't know what you and Andy Grimes had tied up between you about Ben. The one way you can get back to the ranch of yours alive is to talk—and don't leave nothin' out."

A hard stubborn light came into Bruedor's pale hazel eyes. "I ain't got a thing to say. I ain't got a thing to tell, so I can't very well tell it. I didn't know Andy very well, anyhow. And as for anybody named Ben MacKoon I never heard of him."

Horseface sighed. "So it's going to be like that, is it? Well, I can hang out as long as you can, Bruedor. Them Indians that killed my mother had some fancy ways of making people talk, and I learned most of the best ones." Horseface swung his leg over his horse's back, stepped to the ground and came toward Bruedor, still covering him with the black gun.

Bruedor cried in some panic: "Don't—don't do—"

Horseface laughed. "Can the chin music. That ain't the kind I'd like to hear." He snaked up with his left hand and gripped Bruedor by the back of the neck and yanked him off his horse.

Unexpectedly, Bruedor exploded into action. He kicked and bit, fought like a wild cat. Horseface held on with his left hand, rammed his gun back into his holster and brought one up from the ground that landed on Bruedor's jaw like a ton of brick. Bruedor went limp in Horseface's grasp, and Horseface spoke curtly.

"I'm sort of the law, I reckon, hombre. Not like a sheriff nor a

marshal, nor no law dog like that. I'm reppin' for a higher law, as you might say. And it's a job I can't lay down on, and I can't go back to Arizona with nothin' to show. So it's up to you."

Bruedor didn't answer because he couldn't talk right then. He could hear, but he couldn't think very well. He was too dizzy from that jolting hay-maker.

Horseface disarmed him, put him back on his horse and tied him there with his own lass rope. Then Horseface heaved himself back in the saddle and started on, leading Bruedor's horse. Bruedor rasped his throat and tried to say something. Horseface glanced back at him.

"If you're tryin' to ask where we're going, it's just back up here in a canyon somewhere, to make camp and git you comfortable. Because you're going to talk, Bruedor. Get that into your head. I meant just what I said: Your going back to your ranch alive depends on how soon that tongue of yours loosens up. Me, I've waited a long time. I can wait a day or two more."

CHAPTER V

THE TRIAL

DOWN on Horseface's ranch in Arizona, Ben MacKoon fretted and paced restlessly in the ranch-house. He had given Hank Wolford his word of honor that he'd make no effort to escape if they would trust him, so he wasn't tied or locked in. That was the night they returned from Mesa with the body of the sheriff; and after Horseface had ridden on into the dawn on his errand to the north, Ben went out to the bunkhouse and told Wolford he wanted to talk to him.

"You bet, boss, what is it?"

"Boss?" Ben seemed surprised.

Hank smiled. "Well, you're the boss's brother. When he comes back, I reckon you'll be his partner. I might as well get used to it havin' two bosses, I guess."

Ben's dark face smiled back, but the smile was wry. "Listen, Hank: I've done dodging. Maybe, if I hadn't been so dang scared and had stayed right there in the first place, the cards wouldn't have been stacked so high against me that I couldn't get out. I was afraid to try. I'm not afraid any more. I've got something to fight for now."

"I guess you mean your brother," said Hank.

Ben nodded. "Yeah. My brother. I've got to get used to the idea of having a brother. But, if there's any way possible out for me, I've got to be in the clear all the way. For Johnny's sake. Johnny makes everything different."

Hank grinned. "And we got to get used to you callin' Horseface Johnny. I guess we can. But what are you gettin' at, boss? You're leading up to something."

Ben looked out the open door of the bunkhouse, at the corner of the big red barn and the corral beyond, and the horses in the shade at the far side of the corral. "I sure am, Hank. I told you I'm done dodging. We aren't going to bury the sheriff and keep still. I'm going to take him in to the sheriff's office in Drywater and give myself up, stand trial and tell the truth."

Hank glowered and gaped. "You can't do that, boss! Horseface said for you to wait here, and you got to do it. You go doin' anything like that, and you'll stir up a ruckus."

"It isn't a loco move," said Ben sharply. "It's smart. It's making some effort to prove that I *want* to be in the clear. Johnny said there had to be something for me, instead

of everything being against me. It'll be *for* me, that I'm ready to face consequences and take my chances with the law. I'm taking the sheriff's body into Drywater, Hank."

Hank thought for a long minute, saying nothing, staring down at the toes of his boots. Then he suddenly raised his gaze to Ben's face. "I suppose we ought to tie you up and hold you, the way we're doin' with Skink, like Horseface said to. But I've just got a feelin' you're right. We'll try it, anyway."

"We?" echoed Ben. "*We!*"

Hank raised his brows. "Eh? Why, sure, of course, boss. If you're goin' over there on any job like that, we're trailin' along with you. We'll leave the chore man to keep an eye on Skink and see he gets plenty to eat. But we'll be goin' where you go."

Ben nodded, and turned to leave the bunkhouse. "O. K. But let's get moving right away. I'd like to get it over with."

WITHIN another hour, the Double Diamond M crew left the ranch, with Ben and Hank in the lead, the others filing along behind, and the sheriff's body tied on one of the horses. It was nearly a day's ride to Drywater, and by the time they reached there the sun was down and the daylight waning fast. They collected a crowd as they entered the town, and the crowd grew as it followed them down the street and picked up new members along the way. But the time they reached the sheriff's office, half the town was at their heels, staring at Ben and at the blanket-swathed corpse on the rear horse. The MacKoon crew drew up in a group before the sheriff's office, surrounding Ben and the horse hauling the sheriff's body. The deputy that took charge in the absence of the sheriff, a small tough-bodied man with peering eyes and a thin straight mouth, came out of the office and stood there on the platform before the office, surveying Hank and Ben and the burdened horse. The deputy said briskly:

"Looks like you'll be wantin' to see the sheriff. Ain't here. Don't know when he'll be back. Maybe I kin—"

Ben interrupted, recklessly, in a sudden revulsion of spirit against all evasion and all running away from things. He pointed to the blanket-wrapped body. "The sheriff is there. I killed him. I'm Ben MacKoon. I came in to give myself up."

The deputy gasped and backed a step. After all, Ben MacKoon had a reputation. The deputy stared at the body, then up at Ben, and at the crowd standing around. Then he waved a hand at the office behind him. "Git down and come in, then. I'll send fer Judge Pocket. Take him a few days to git here, but I reckon we kin promise you your trial by week or so come tomorrow." He gave Ben a swift glance of survey. "You ain't got no guns?"

Ben shook his head, a faint dry smile on his dark face. "I didn't think I'd need guns, deputy." He swung out of the saddle, holding his bandaged hand out of the way.

For the first time the deputy noticed the injured hand. He grunted audibly and motioned again toward the office. "Well, come on in. Have to lock you up right away. Jail's behind the sheriff's office, of course." He backed hastily and moved aside to give room as Ben walked into the office, most of the Double Diamond M crew close behind him. Two of the crew were busy untying the sheriff's body. The deputy scowled at the muttering crowd in the street. "Git along, all of you. You kin come to the trial when Judge Pocket gits

here. Git, now. I don't want no nonsense."

The crowd broke and began to melt away. When a man came in and gave himself up, it sort of took the wind out of any mob spirit. The deputy went on inside and walked up to Ben with his smart brisk air.

"These men are the crew from my brother's ranch," Ben said. "They'll wait here in town for the trial."

The deputy nodded. "Reckon we kin bed 'em down all right. Here's the cell back this way, MacKoon." He followed Ben warily, hand hovering near his gun. "Might take more'n a week to git Judge Pocket. Never kin tell."

HE was right, there. It took ten days to get Judge Pocket over to Drywater to sit in the town hall behind a table and hear the trial of Ben MacKoon. It wasn't much of a trial. The judge asked Ben how he came to kill the sheriff.

Ben said: "He cornered me. I was camped out in an old line cabin, and he found me. I tried to duck. He yelled at me to stop, and I kept going. He shot twice, and I didn't take any more chance. I turned and let him have it, just to stop him. I stopped him too good."

Judge Pocket asked for other testimony. There was none. The judge asked whether anyone knew of any ameliorating circumstances.

Hank Wolford stood up. "What's that mean?"

Judge Pocket peered at him over horn-rimmed glasses. "It means does anybody know anything good about him, that's any sort of excuse for him. Any reason the law shouldn't demand the full penalty."

"Yeah. Sure do," Hank answered. "Feller over in Wyoming framed him in the beginning to hide his own dirt, and if that hadn't happened the boss never would of been no outlaw at all." He told all the circumstances of what Ben had related.

At the end, the Judge merely shook his head. "Sorry, but that's only hearsay. You've got no proof of it. You just got his word. We can't admit such evidence in court. Anybody else got anything to say?" Nobody had. And the judge said words that had been old to him for a long time. "... hang by the neck till you are dead."

Nobody had noticed in particular that the entire crew of the Double Diamond M was right there in a way that blocked everyone else from Ben the minute they closed their ranks. But they noticed it now, and excitement flamed in the court room. The MacKoon men moved swiftly, and suddenly there they were, shoulder to shoulder, surrounding Ben in a hollow square, their backs toward Ben, facing the crowd at all four points of the compass. Every one of them leveled two steady guns at the amazed and suddenly angry spectators.

Hank Wolford said curtly: "Out of the way! Don't try to stop us, and nobody'll git hurt. The boss told the truth, and you won't take his word." He glared at the judge.

"I—I can't!" said the judge desperately. "It ain't according to law. I've got to have evidence."

Hank Wolford shook his head. "That's just too bad, then, I reckon. We was willing for the boss to stand trial. But we ain't willing for him to swing when he don't deserve it. We're takin' him away. Anybody tries to stop us is going to stop lead. On your way, boys! Time's a-wastin'."

The hollow square began to move toward the door, and the crowd opened up and backed away, muttering and threatening, but not fool-

ish enough to start anything in the face of those bristling guns. The crew, with Ben MacKoon in the center, marched out of the courtroom and into the street, and Hank Wolford stood there with both guns leveled on the doorway, holding the crowd back, while Ben and the rest of the crew flung themselves into the saddle and raced away.

Ben was a trifle slower than the others. When he went to get on his horse, he found his loaded belts and guns slung over the horn. He'd left them in the bunkhouse at the Double Diamond M. He glanced at Hank Wolford's erect back, as he swiftly buckled on his weapons. Was it Hank who brought them along, just in case? There was a grim thin smile on Ben MacKoon's face, as he vaulted into the saddle and went thundering down the street with the members of the MacKoon crew.

Then the last man was on the way, and Hank backed to his horse and was in the saddle, looking backward and still covering the door. Then the whole crew was in mad retreat, and suddenly the crowd was pouring from the town hall into the street, shouting wildly, running for their horses.

Hank shouted to Ben as he rode up alongside: "It's going to be nip and tuck, but we ought to make it."

Ben answered tersely: "At the worst, hot lead's better than hemp. We've done the best we could. Now, I guess it's up to luck."

Hank's face was solemn. "I guess, boss, it's up to Horseface."

CHAPTER VI

THE ANSWER

THEY drew away from the pursuit in the first fast dash, but there were some fast horses back there under those Drywater men, and the pursuers began to gain ground again, the indignant deputy well in the lead. A couple of miles at that pace, and the horses began to labor, and the Double Diamond M boys knew they were going to have to stop and hole in and make a stand. They began watching for decent cover, and found it before long in a deep gully swerving off to the right, heavily timbered on the south slope, the north slope practically bare.

Barren it was, but there were numerous pockets and nests of big boulders. Hank headed for one such boulder cluster that reared fifteen feet high, piled into a good-sized grotto. Before the pursuing posse men from Drywater came into sight, the Double Diamond M crew had reached the boulder nest, tethered their horses behind the boulders, and were cached between the boulders themselves, out of sight—and out of reach. Any posse man who tried to get near enough for a six-gun to have any effect would himself be within range of the six-guns in the boulder nest, only he would be without cover or shelter of any kind.

Hank said grimly: "The only way they can smoke us out of here is to go back to Drywater for rifles."

He and Ben lay on their bellies, watching between two boulders, as the Drywater men came to a halt in the gully bed, milled around and glared up at the boulder nest, talking and waving angrily. Even the judge was with them. Then the judge reached down to a scabbard along his saddle and held up something that glinted long and sinister in the sun. The judge *had* a long-range high-power rifle.

One of the other men took it, raised it to firing position and sent a bullet whining into the nest. The lead struck a boulder edge, caromed, knocked particles of flying rock into

the air and sank itself into the calf of Roy Wheeler's leg. Roy scowled, but he didn't say anything. From down in the gully bed, the judge shouted up the slope.

"You're caught high and dry, if you was figuring on sneaking out of there come dark. We'll build a fire in the gully and one on the ridge—and we've got a rifle. I'll send for more rifles and lay a ring of 'em around you. You ain't got a chance. You might as well give up without any more trouble."

Hank looked at Roy, who was stoically winding a strip of his neckerchief around his bleeding leg. They had to get Roy to a doctor and have that lead dug out.

"I guess we wasn't so smart, boss. But we ain't licked yet. Wait till dark, and we'll cover your retreat and—"

Ben spoke coldly. "No. Dodging again. Running away from the law. Afraid of my shadow. It ain't worth living if I have to go on that way. This is the end of it. I'm going down and give myself up. Don't try to stop me, you'll only get hurt." He called down to the gully, to Judge Pocket: "I'm coming down there, judge, with my hands up. I can't let you shoot these boys up, just so I can have a chance to keep on running. I'm tired of running."

The judge shouted back: "Come ahead. We'll hold our fire."

As Ben got to his feet, Hank shot a meaning glance at one of the other boys, Will Gapple. Will was half-again as big as Hank, up, down and across. He simply stepped up behind Ben and took him, with both arms around him. The black-haired outlaw tried to fight, savagely spitting angry protest.

"You fool, Will! Let me go! You crazy galoots are—"

"We're obeyin' Horseface," Hank cut in. "He said to hang onto you till we heard from him. I reckon that means we hang onto you, mister. Don't think we won't knock you cold and hogtie you if we have to. Pipe down!" Hank raised his voice to send his words down to the gully bed. "He ain't comin', judge. We're sort of detainin' him till we get further instructions."

The judge swore angrily, then said something to some of the men behind him. Four of them prodded their horses and started back to town. The judge called up to the boulder nest: "I'm sending back to Drywater for more rifles. We can't sit around here arguing with you fools for the next three or four days."

Hank didn't answer, not loud enough for Judge Pocket to hear. He said to the crew: "We can hang on as long as they can. Roy, you better tell 'em you're throwing up your hand, go down and git yourself to a doc with that leg."

Roy Wheeler said tartly: "I don't shoot with my leg."

Hank grinned. "I hear tell it's been done." He turned a frown on the muttering and enraged Ben. "Boss, you ain't doin' yourself or me or nobody else no good. We're cached here in a safe spot, and we ain't budgin' till we have to—and we ain't letting you go till we hear from Horseface. You might as well set yourself to the idea. You go down there where them gents can lay hands on you, and they'll string you to the nearest tree in nothin' flat. You're staying right where you are. If they think they can run us out of here, they got another think comin'."

BUT they knew that the tale was of different caliber when the several high-power rifles began to pour their screaming lead into the boulder nest

from every side, when they had no weapon with which to return fire that could come anywhere near the posse. Roy Wheeler got a bullet through the arm, another one ploughed across Hank Wolford's jaw, and another bored through Ben's hat and laid his scalp open. Ben looked at Hank, with the blood running down his face, and took off his hat and mopped at the blood with his handkerchief. He was a little dazed from the blow on the skull.

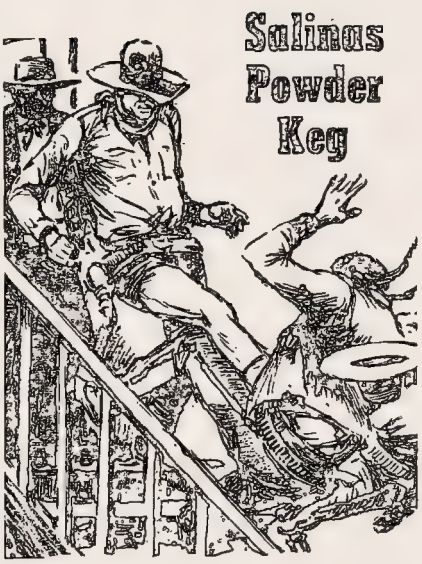
"Can't you see it's no use, Hank? They'll get us all, so what are you gaining by being so mule-headed? Pull in your horns and let me stop this before some of you boys get killed."

Hank barely glanced at him. Then, suddenly with a wild leap and a catlike dart sidewise, Ben was on his feet and out of their reach, running out into the open, his hands high above his head, arm's length, palm open toward the gully below. Hank cursed in fury, and the entire crew leaped up and swarmed after him, banking behind him, even Roy Wheeler limping gamely on his swelling leg. Nobody said anything now. The bark of the high-power rifles died abruptly away. Like that, with Ben in the lead, hands up, the crew bunched close behind, they went down the slope toward the men waiting in the gully below.

Some man close behind the judge said wearily: "String him up. Get it over with. We've had enough of this business. String him up!"

Judge Pocket said: "Keep order, then. I don't want any rioting. Ride along until we come to a suitable tree, and get a rope up."

In strange grim order, Ben and the judge and the Double Diamond M crew in the lead, they started down the gully looking for a tree. In less than a half mile they found one, and one of the men from Drywater, a lean little man with a pale



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Western Story

10c A COPY AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

bony face, climbed the tree and fastened the rope, came down and started deftly fashioning a noose. He had the air of having performed this office for Judge Pocket many times before.

Hank Wolford spoke quietly, but his voice was cold enough to freeze the edge of their hot tempers: "The first man that tries to lay a noose around Ben MacKoon's head, I don't care who he is, from the judge down, he eats lead. Plenty of it. And we shoot to kill."

The judge glared at him. "And if any one of you boys pulls a fool thing like that, *he'll* eat lead."

"That'll be all of us, I reckon," said Hank. "Make no never minds, judge. The man that starts for Ben with a noose, that man dies."

The rope came slithering down the side of the tree. The little man had tossed it up to try something about the slipknot. The sound of the rope slapping against the tree trunk was loud in the silence. The judge tartly commanded the little man to get the noose around Ben MacKoon's neck. The little man looked at Hank and wet his lips, but he didn't stir. The judge cursed under his breath.

"White-livered, are you? All of you! Well, I'll attend to fixing the noose myself." He rode over to the tree, caught up the noose and wheeled his horse. Deliberately he started toward Ben.

Somebody in the crowd gasped. Hank set his jaw, and his face started to turn slowly white.

He had his hand on his gun butt when, from the top of the ridge above them, a voice suddenly shouted loudly: *"Hold it!"*

THE whole Double Diamond M crew jerked about in their saddles to stare, unbelieving. It was the voice of Horseface Johnny MacKoon. He came riding down the slope toward them, and he looked as if he had taken a bath in brimstone since they had last seen him, but his long face was triumphant, and his big teeth flashed in a thin smile as he saw them staring up at him. Before him rode a short nervous man with sandy hair and pale hazel eyes.

Ben MacKoon stared and said loudly: "Gill Bruedor!"

Nobody else said anything. The judge frowned first at Ben, then at Hank, then at Horseface and Gill. But he kept his mouth shut as Horseface and Gill rode straight down into the gully and up to the group of them.

Horseface said: "Howdy, Judge Pocket. I reckon this is no time to waste words, so we won't waste any, all of us havin' eyes and being able to use 'em. You remember who it was Ben MacKoon was supposed to have killed when he started on the owlhoot, judge?"

Judge Pocket had seen too many queer happenings to be reckless about refusing to weigh all sides, wild as they might seem. He said quietly: "Every lawman from hell to breakfast knows he killed and robbed the Penney brothers."

Horseface stared at the short man with sandy hair and pale hazel eyes. "This is Gill Bruedor, judge. He and I been talkin' up in the hills, and it only took three days of higher-up kind law to show him the error of his ways and loosen up his tongue. Ben MacKoon started on his outlawin' career because he was supposed to have killed the Penney brothers. Gill, you can take it from there."

Gill Bruedor, avoiding the intent gaze of Ben MacKoon's expressionless blue-black eyes, gave his attention to the judge. Gill's pale nervous face was drawn and worried,

there were a couple of paling bruises on the side of his face, but his thin voice was steady. He pointed to Ben, but he spoke to the judge.

"He didn't kill 'em. I did. See that scar on his forehead, there? He got that tryin' to stop me. And after I saw what I'd done, I didn't want my mother to find out. I went to my uncle, my mother's brother, Andy Grimes, and begged him to help git me out of it. At first he said no, then he got sorry for me, and for ma's sake he did it. He helped me frame Ben. Then he got himself elected sheriff so he could hound Ben. He was going to kill Ben finally, because nobody else could get Ben, and we was afraid he'd finally tell on me to save his own hide. So Uncle Andy was going to corner Ben, and no matter whether Ben give up or not, he was going to shoot Ben in the back and say he tried to get away. I guess that's all."

Judge Pocket drew a long hard breath. "Well, from where I sit, it's enough. I never heard more skulduggery in one short speech in all my life. You willin' to swear on the Bible that you're telling the truth, Gill Bruedor?"

Gill gulped and swallowed. "Yeah. It *is* the truth. And I ain't never been happy there on the ranch with ma, all the time afraid, afraid every where I went, every way I looked. Mr. John MacKoon here, he made me own up to everything, and then I was glad to get it off my chest. I come down here of my own free will, and he'll tell you that's so."

Horseface said: "Yeah. He offered to come. I reckon it was the law workin' in him ag'in."

Gill held up his head. "I don't care much what you do with me. I'm glad it's all over. Anything's better'n being always afraid."

The judge looked at Hank, then at Horseface, then at Ben. Then he looked out over the hushed crowd of men holding their breath to hear what his verdict would be. He didn't have to speak loud for them to hear.

"This ain't a hard case to give a verdict to. Ben MacKoon, you're acquitted. Gill Bruedor, you go back to Wyoming. I'll recommend that you get a prison sentence for manslaughter, the sentence to be suspended; that means so long as you behave yourself, you're a free man. The minute you pull any dirty work, you go to jail." He looked at Horseface. "I guess, all the way around, you kind of earn some good words yourself, MacKoon."

Horseface Johnny MacKoon rode up beside his brother. "Nope. I just used my ears and put two and two together, judge. Skink gave me the idee: he said it would be more to the point if Ben here had killed the gent that framed him in the first place. Well, he did, didn't he? Andy Grimes *was* the man that framed him to save Gill. And when Skink made that crack, I suddenly remembered that Sheriff Grimes—who was known in Mesa merely as Singleshot Andy—had come from Wyoming, and I started ridin'."

Judge Pocket looked at Ben MacKoon's dark face, at the sudden light that burned in the ex-outlaw's blue-black eyes, and Judge Pocket had the last word: "Go on home," he said peevishly. "All of you. Git goin'. Of all the danged ruckuses I ever seen. You, Horseface MacKoon, I wish I could always find real justice like that law of yourn. Oh, shucks! Get goin'!"

THE END

SMART KID

He was a smart kid, all right—too smart to let a sidewinder run a sandy on him, if he could help it

— by
HAPSBURG
LIEBE

AGAIN the tall, wiry man in dusty black leaned out of the chaparral and peered down the cow-country road. This time he recognized the oncoming lone rider. He laughed a silent hard laugh and slipped the eye-holed bandanna off his wolfish face. Having owlhooted with him for months, Little Dornbush would know him if he wore a dozen masks.

He pulled his horse a few steps farther back in the scrub, unleathered his six-shooter and sat there waiting with every nerve and sinew

"Come on, kid," he said, gripping his gun. "We're riding west from here—both of us."

taut. When you stuck up Little Dornbush, you had to be on your toes. Giving him a split second in a gun argument wouldn't be just a big mistake. It would be a last mistake.

The lone rider came on. He was very young and, as his nickname indicated, very slenderly built. His clothing was that of a cowboy and he rode a Munroe cow horse. His slim left hand held both the rein and a small satchel that rested on his saddle front; the other hung near the butt of an old range Colt.

"Up, kid—quick!" barked the tall, wiry man in dusty black.

His six-shooter menacing, he spurred into the road. Little Dornbush jerked his right hand upward. In almost no time at all the robber had the Dornbush weapon and the Munroe Ranch pay-roll satchel. He thrust the gun inside his shirt.

"Come on, kid," he cried, his own six-shooter still a deadly threat, "we're ridin' west from here, both of us!"

Young Dornbush spoke quietly. "Well, Irby, all right; just as you say."

Irby Holly scowled. Somehow, this seemed too easy. They rode through the roadside chaparral and to rolling, grassy terrain. Then:

"I get you, Irby," Dornbush said. "In makin' me go along, you figure that old Ranse Munroe will think I've run off with his pay-roll money. When I show up later, if I do, you figure they won't believe what I say about bein' robbed—and if they do believe me, you'll have such a head start there'll be no use even tryin' to catch you."

The black-clad Holly grinned a mean grin. He said, "You always was a smart kid!"

"It's too bad," the kid said. "Old Ranse, he took me off the owlhoot and gimme a cow job; sends me to town after the mail every day, to show that he trusts me; and today he sent me for the pay money all by myself. It sure is too bad."

Irb Holly laughed a mean laugh. Dornbush kept talking:

"Look, Irby. You was a fool when you left town gamblin' for the owlhoot. I told you that the day you joined us. Me, I'd been a fool, too; only, I'd tackled it just for the hell of it. Far as I know, there's nothin' big against you yet, same as there was nothin' big against me. Why don't you leave the owlhoot, Irby, like I did? Gimme back that satchel and my gun, and I'll never say a word. Hope to die, I won't. Will you?"

"So you went soft," Holly said.

"Not on your life. I went sensible. Irby, you don't know a man who's rode owlhoot trails ten years, or five, or even three. They've all wound up behind iron bars—if they didn't stop some lawman's bullet, or plumb ruin a good rope!"

"I'll risk it," Holly said.

Little Dornbush shrugged. "Your funeral, not mine."

They rode on through the rolling grassland. Irb Holly spoke again:

"I sorta surprised you, kid, didn't I? Most stick-ups woulda picked a spot where the road crosses a creek, with trees and underbrush for perfect hidin' in."

"And where they can ride the creek in their getaway, leavin' no tracks," the kid said. He went on, "I mighta ducked outa the saddle on the off side and shot you under the hoss' belly, Irby. Trouble there was, this is old Ranse's pet hoss and your bullet likely woulda killed him. Yeah, old Ranse even trusted me with his pet saddler, Irby."

"Hoof marks don't show in this dry grass much more'n they show

in the bed of a creek," Holly said.

"That's right," Little Dornbush agreed. "You mind tellin' me where we're headed for now?"

Holly did not answer. The question wasn't worth it. He'd kept the kid going in a straight line, which could mean only that they were heading for the desert.

AN hour afterward, they rode into the broad expanse of sand and rock, scrub, and the eternal unfriendly pear. It was noon and the sun was broiling hot. With one eye

religiously on the new Munroe cowboy, Holly took the canteen off his saddle and drank. He replaced the canteen without having offered his waterless companion a drop.

"Thanks," said Dornbush, mopping sweat.

"Don't mention it," said Holly.

When they were two miles inside the hot waste land, Little Dornbush drawled, "So you aim to cross this desert, Irby."

"Right the first time," Holly said. "You're smart, like I always knew."

There was a hooting tone in that. Dornbush grinned, but his eye held an odd glint. "Keep pokin' me with it, don't you? Maybe I'm smarter than you think I am, Irby. There's still time for you to gimme back that Munroe pay money and let me go on to the ranch with it, me forgettin' all about this. If you don't, Irby, you'll sure wish you had. You—"

"I don't want to hear that any more," sourly interrupted Irb Holly.

"All right," the other said, voice brittle, "you won't. It was your last chance."

"What you mean by 'last chance,' you little devil?"

Munroe's new range rider only shrugged.

The two rode on, on and on, through the hot afternoon and the bone-dry land. Holly knew the desert well. His course never wavered. He signed a halt at sundown, beside a waterhole. They got out of their saddles, dropped rein, lay flat on their bellies and drank, then allowed their horses to drink. Holly was still keeping a sharp eye on the captive. His six-shooter was always ready. He said:

"The moon's up now, and it'll be a nice night to travel. But I think we better grab us a couple hours of shut-eye here before we go on. Me, I didn't sleep much last night. Sorry I hafta tie you up, kid."

"Yeah, I'll bet you're sorry," the kid said.

Holly used stout rawhide strings that he'd cut off the back of Dornbush's saddle. His knots were perfect.

After he had tied the two horses to scrub clumps that couldn't be pulled up, he sat down with the Munroe satchel, opened it and counted the loot. Nine hundred and seventy three dollars; not bad. He shoved the bank-banded sheaves of greenbacks inside his shirt with Little Dornbush's six-shooter, and threw the empty satchel into the nearest pear copse.

"Wish we had some chow," he told the trussed-up cowboy, who lay watching him.

"First time I've missed a good supper since I left the owlhoot," the cowboy said. "Well, here's hopin' we have a fine breakfast to make up for it."

"Fine breakfast here in the desert? What you talkin' about, young un?"

"Here's hopin', I said."

Holly swore. He half believed that Dornbush had spoken without thinking and was trying to cover up. But if the kid was carrying an ace in his sleeve, what the hell could it be?

IRB'S thoughts carried him back to the scene of the stick-up. There'd been no witness; he was sure of that. In a road filled with hoofprints, it wasn't likely that anybody had noticed two sets turning into the chaparral. Certainly their trail didn't show in the dry grass. Here in the desert there'd been wind enough to cover their trail with powdery sand.

"What you worryin' about, Irby?" asked Dornbush, grinning.

"You're so smart," hooted Irb Holly, "I'm afraid you'll just say 'hocus-pocus' and walk right outa that rawhide."

Holly laughed. He wasn't worrying now. A minute later he piled down not far from Little Dornbush and began wooing his two hours of shut-eye. In order that he might not be too comfortable and sleep too long, he had chosen a rocky spot.

Holly didn't sleep too long, but he did sleep too soundly. It wasn't rock that woke him. He sat up blinking squarely into the now high, bright moon. Instinctively he went to his holster.

"What the hell!"

The holster was empty. He slapped his hands to his shirt, front and sides. It was flat! He sprang up facing the other way in the moonlight. Then he could see, and that which he saw he thought at first must be a bad dream.

There before him stood the tall, gaunt and bearded old Ranse Munroe and six of his cowboys with weapons in their hands!

A question tore itself out of Irb Holly. "How . how did this happen?"

"You can tell him, kid," old Ranse said, and chuckled.

Little Dornbush was one of the six cowboys. He said, "I'm plumb tickled to oblige, Mr. Munroe. Irby, here she is:

"We're takin' you to the sheriff, Irby, and I'd be sorry for you if you wasn't so mean. Because what you lack the most is brains. You remember me tellin' you there at the stick-up that Mr. Munroe'd been sendin' me to town every day for the mail just to show that he trusted me?"

Irb Holly looked downward at nothing. "Why, I . . . I believe you did. What about it?"

The old cowman and his riders laughed. The kid answered the crestfallen owlhooter:

"You didn't think o' me havin' the mail in my pocket then. Five letters. I managed to drop one in the road without you noticin', three on the grass half a mile apart, and one in the desert, all in a straight line. It made a trail I knew Mr. Munroe would pick up—and anybody crossin' the desert from there was sure to be headin' for this waterhole!"

Smart kid.

THE END

Ken stepped quickly into the clearing, and the six-shooter in his hand crashed thunderously as Gabe Shelby whirled for a quick shot.

MONTANA BUCKAROO

by LEE BOND

Trouble never left Ken Brayton alone for long, and he knew it was still on his trail when those three border-jumping rustlers backed him up against the wall

CHAPTER I

A PILGRIM IN TROUBLE

THERE was no guesswork about it, Ken Brayton decided calmly. The thing punching his right side was the muzzle of a gun. And he doubted if anyone in all that noisy crowd of Saturday night revelers noticed that a man was being held up right in their midst.

The gaunt man who was pushing

the gun against Ken's side looked as innocent of such a thing as the fat and sweating bartender behind the counter. The tall fellow leaned forward against the bar, a glass in his left hand. He lifted the glass to his mouth now and then, sipping the amber contents. He was looking steadily into the beer-spattered back bar, just as Ken Brayton was doing. Thus they sized each other up, neither turning his head for a direct look.

Ken lifted his own glass, sipped its contents, and spread his hands on the bar top in wordless surrender. There was no fear in his level gaze. He saw the thin mouth of the tall man moving, heard words come through the laughter and stamping and glass clinking of the saloon's other patrons.

"A fight'll start any minute now, Shorty," the tall hombre said. "It'll be at the back yonder, on the dance floor. When everybody chouses back that way to see the excitement, you head for the front door."

Ken had no time to reply, even if there were anything he could have said.

Some hombre let out a bellow that seemed to shake the whole room. "You're a liar!" that lusty voice rang out. "You tripped my gal and me on purpose. Maybe this'll—"

The voice ended in a swift scurry of feet, the sodden sound of blows. A percentage girl started screeching shrilly, only the sound was drowned by the sudden roaring of a swiftly fired six-shooter.

"Move!" the tall man ordered.

Ken Brayton put down his glass, turned and started for the front door. That gun was still banging, and Ken realized that the lights were being shot out.

The unknown marksman got the last swinging lamp while Ken was reaching out to push at the batwing doors. He saw the darkness leap up about him and slowed, feeling instinctively with his worn boot sole for the doorsill. But the darkness was gone, it seemed, as swiftly as it had appeared. There was light again, yet it was a queer sort of light for a saloon, for it was a mixture of many colors that whirled, danced and flickered.

When the lights quit whirling, Ken Brayton saw scabby plastered walls about him instead of the glittering interior of the saloon. He smelled stale tobacco smoke that mingled with the odor of burning kerosene. He was stretched out on a pile of dusty straw, and there were three men squatting on their heels nearby, watching him owlishly. One of them was the lanky gent who had prodded him in the side with a six-shooter before somebody shot out the saloon lights.

KEN sat up, unable to suppress a groan as pain flamed at the back of his head. He lifted a trembling hand and felt an egg-sized lump at the base of his skull. Holding his hand over the throbbing lump, he gazed at the three silent men before him.

A bitter grin quirked his lips as he stood up, began brushing dust and wisps of straw from his threadbare Levis and patched shirt.

"You drew a blank, eh, tall feller?" he asked dryly, and looked at the man who had held the gun on him.

"Maybe," the slit-mouthed fellow shrugged. "Maybe not. That all depends on how much sense you've got, Shorty."

Ken Brayton sobered. He shuffled his worn-out boots around in the straw until he had his weight balanced a little better. His knees were

trembly, but his brain was clearing rapidly now.

"You stuck me up, mister, then whacked me over the noggin with one of them two guns you're packin'," he accused the tall hombre.

The three men grinned at him, got to their feet and watched warily as he stepped off the straw pile to the gritty floor.

"The name," he told them flatly, "is Ken Brayton. You, tall feller, remember that. Don't call me Shorty again."

Ken did not sound much perturbed, much less angry. Yet something in the way his green eyes puckered kept the three men before him on the alert.

"Smooth your feathers, Brayton," the tall one grunted. "A little rooster like you don't want to bristle up at me. I'm Ike Judd."

He pronounced the name as if it should mean something. Ken Brayton had never heard of Ike Judd, and said so.

Turning his attention to Judd's two companions, Ken studied them closely for the first time. One of them was a fat man, short and heavy-paunched. The fat man's face was round and double-chinned, and his eyes were sleepy and dark behind fleshy lids. He grinned a lopsided grin at Ken Brayton and seemed friendly enough. But Ken decided that the lazy-appearing hombre might be far more sinister than outward appearances branded him.

Ike Judd's other companion was a burly towhead, with a flat, stupid face and bloodshot gray eyes. The fellow's left cheek was swollen and beginning to turn purple, and there was a raw gash over one glittering eye. He held an uncorked bottle in one big hand, and kept nibbling at its contents from time to time.

"That fat gent is Art Lannigan and this towhead is Toby Morgan," Judd was saying. "You better get along with the boys and me, Brayton, if you want to stay healthy."

Ken's lips tightened, and the green eyes puckered a little more. "What's the play, Judd?" he asked. "You didn't aim to rob me, because you'd have better sense than to pick on a down and outer like me. I'm not on the dodge, so you can't be after scalp money. And I'm a plumb stranger in this border country, so you can't have a grudge against me."

"Don't rush me, cowboy," Ike Judd answered. "You and me want to get acquainted, so we'll have a drink together. We've got a lot in common, you and me have."

He snatched the bottle from Toby Morgan and shoved it at Ken. But Ken waved the bottle away impatiently.

"All you and me have in common is the same color of red hair, and blamed near the same green eyes," he declared.

"Calm down, feller," advised Judd. He took a pull at the bottle, studying Brayton thoughtfully.

"Blast it!" Ken snorted. "I'm sick of this mystery stuff. Unless you shoot me in the back, Judd, I'm headin' out that door yonder. I reckon we're not too far from Dry Creek, and I guess I can find my way back to the town."

KEN started across the room, heading for a warped old door at the far end. To his amazement, none of the three men so much as lifted a hand toward stopping him. But he had covered only half the distance to the door when Art Lannigan's purring baritone halted him.

"None of us will try to stop you, Cal Gorman," Lannigan said. "But

murder is a hangin' offense here in Arizona Territory. We're still in Dry Creek, so you won't have to walk far to reach the main drag. But when you reach it, you'll be arrested for murder, Gorman."

"Murder?" Ken blurted, whirling. Something in the three grins he saw made his spine tingle.

"What's the idea in callin' me by some other man's name?" he demanded. "You called me Gorman —Cal Gorman. I told you—"

"Shut up, and listen to me!" Judd ordered. "Art wasn't jokin' about that murder business. And he wasn't jokin' about the Cal Gorman name, either. From now on, you're Cal Gorman—or you can hang for stickin' a knife in Gabe Shelby's back a while ago. It's all up to you."

Ken Brayton did not know anyone named Gabe Shelby. But he had known nothing but hard luck for the past two years, and here it was again, leering at him from the faces of three men who stood watching him expectantly.

Ken's shoulders sagged a little, and he pulled a deep breath into his lungs, expelling it slowly. He studied Ike Judd and the other two narrowly, his mind cool and clear now.

He remembered vividly how it had been back there in the Topaz Saloon. He had been standing at the bar, with this Ike Judd poking his side with a gun. On the dance floor at the back of the room a fight had started. Toby Morgan, obviously enough, had been the gent to start that brawl, since his face was marked from recent fighting. Then someone had started shooting out the lights, and Ken remembered how it had been dark for a second, then crazy lights had flared. Not, of course, that any lights really flared. He had simply had that impression because Judd had slammed him across the back of the skull with a gun. And during all the confusion that must have followed after the lights were shot out, someone had rammed a knife into a man by the name of Gabe Shelby.

That Toby Morgan had shot out those saloon lights, then used the knife on Shelby, Ken Brayton did not doubt for a moment. Those things were all there in his mind, dovetailing to form their evil pic-

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ture. But other things were not clear. Why, for instance, had this trio chosen him as a goat for their murder scheme? Why did they want his name changed to Cal Gorman?

Ken walked slowly back, watching the grins on the three faces become smug.

"Decided to act sensible, eh?" Ike Judd demanded.

"No," Ken denied. "If I had any sense, I'd walk on out and let you try framin' me."

CHAPTER II

JUDD'S ULTIMATUM

THE three men laughed in unison, and Ken did not like the grisly note in that laughter. Judd shoved a bony hand inside his shirt, drew out a fat wallet and something rolled up in a faded-blue bandanna. Ken's hand lifted to his throat in a quick motion. The bandanna in Ike Judd's hand was the one Ken had been wearing when he rode into Dry Creek that afternoon.

Ike Judd unfurled the slim roll, and there was a knife, a wicked-looking bowie with red stains along the gleaming blade. Some of the red smear had come off on Ken's blue bandanna.

"Look, cowhand!" Ike said, grinning. "There's the knife you used on Gabe Shelby, the blade of it still bloody. And here's why you pushed eight inches of steel into Shelby's back."

Judd had opened the cowhide wallet as he talked, exposing a thick sheaf of yellow-backed bills.

"Ike and Toby and me seen you runnin' away from the saloon, and followed you," fat Art Lannigan was saying. "We cornered you here in this old house at the edge of town. We bucked you down and searched you, and found that wallet along with the knife, inside your shirt. See how that'll look to a jury?"

Ken Brayton saw how that would look to a jury. He had ridden into town that afternoon, a half-ragged waddy on a bay horse that was leg weary from long travel and bony from lack of proper feeding. Ken wondered if the sick dread assailing him showed in his eyes.

"There's three hundred and sixty dollars in this wallet," Judd continued. "It wouldn't take a jury long to decide that a busted cowhand wanted that money bad enough to kill a man for it. Do we turn you and this wallet and the knife over to Sheriff Lew French? Or do you want to be Cal Gorman?"

"Bein' Cal Gorman don't call for a thing but a little play actin' on your part," Art Lannigan urged.

"I don't want a noose around my gullet, and that's a fact," Ken Brayton sighed. "So lay out your cards, and if the deal ain't too raw, I'll be this hombre, Gorman."

Ike Judd and his two companions did not answer immediately. They passed the bottle between them, something unholy and sinister gleaming in their eyes.

"Cal Gorman is old Steve Walker's grandson," Judd spoke at last.

"Do tell!" Ken exclaimed. "And how is old Steve these days?"

"Don't get lippy with me!" warned Judd.

"Then who is Steve Walker?" Ken fired back. "If I'm to be his grandson, I ought to know somethin' about the old geezer."

"Steve Walker owns the Lazy 8," Judd stated bluntly.

IT was explanation enough. Ken Brayton had been hearing of the vast Lazy 8 for several days now as he approached the border. He

had not paid a lot of attention to the talk he had overheard here and there when he stopped in towns along the trail. But he remembered enough to realize that the Lazy 8 was considered one of the biggest and best ranches in the country.

"Who am I supposed to fool when I pass myself off as Steve Walker's grandson?" Ken wanted to know.

"Steve Walker, mainly." Judd grinned at him. "You're about twenty-three or twenty-four, I figger."

"About," admitted Ken. "But how come Steve Walker wouldn't know his own kin, especially a grandson?"

"The old buzzard kicked his daughter out, nearly thirty years ago, because she married George Gorman, a man old Steve hated," Judd explained. "When George Gorman's wife died, she left him with a month-old son, Calvin. Gorman fetched the young un here to Dry Crick, and tried to get old Steve Walker to take the boy and raise it proper. But Steve run George Gorman off the Lazy 8 at the point of a gun, and wouldn't let the baby stay, either."

"What was the matter with George Gorman raisin' his own kid?" Ken asked.

"George was what you might call a travelin' man," Judd answered dryly. "He had a bad habit of pointin' a six-shooter at stage drivers and tellin' 'em to kick the strong box off the boot. That kind of playfulness made badge toters sore as the devil, so George had to keep changin' climates pretty fast."

"And he was luggin' this baby around with him?" Ken queried in surprise.

"Blazes, no!" Ike Judd snorted. "George left the kid of his with a border-hoppin' old buzzard named Pelon, and paid him and his missus to take care of the brat. But the law cornered George Gorman before the baby was a year old, and when the smoke cleared away George was dead.

"When Steve Walker heard about George gettin' killed, he headed for the border with some of his crew, aimin' to take his grandson away from Pelon. But Pelon heard Walker was comin', and ducked into Sonora with the boy. To this day, Steve Walker's never got a trace of his grandson or of Pelon."

"So you want me to go to the Lazy 8 and claim to be Cal Gorman," Ken Brayton mused. "Why? What's your game?"

"My game is none of your business," Judd answered gruffly.

"No dice, then," Ken said flatly. "You aim to profit some way by sendin' me to Steve Walker as his grandson. I've got sense enough to know that, Judd. But I won't go until I know just how you aim to play your cards."

IKE JUDD glared at Ken. Art Lannigan hummed softly, round face expressionless as he studied Ken.

Toby Morgan put his bottle down, rasped his broad palms together a few times, then rolled those hands into knobby fists. "I'll whup some sense into him, Ike," he declared.

He started toward Ken, grinning his lopsided grin.

"Maybe knockin' him around would show him we mean business, at that," Ike Judd decided. "Give him a few jolts, Toby. But don't cripple him up too much, you big ox."

"Hold on!" Lannigan said sharply.

Ike Judd squinted at the fat man, frowning disapproval. Toby Mor-

gan stopped in his tracks, glanced over his shoulder at Judd questioningly.

"This Brayton ranny looks mule-stubborn to me," Lannigan said. "Besides, why not tell him what we aim to do once he gets in solid at the Lazy 8, Ike?"

Ike Judd looked thoughtful for a few moments, then said, "All right, Toby, forget it. Maybe Art's right, at that."

He turned on Ken scowling. "All the boys and me want is a chance to get at the stock on Steve Walker's range," he said. "We want the prize pure-bred stuff old man Walker keeps hid out here and there on his ranch. Your job will be to locate them pure-bred white faces, then tell me where to find 'em."

"Why bother with pure-breds that are close guarded, likely, when Walker's range must be full of range stuff that'd fetch good prices?" Ken asked.

"Why I want just the pure-breds is my own business," Judd said flatly. "You do your end of the job and quit askin' questions."

"Speakin' of questions, I've been aimin' to ask you gents about this Gabe Shelby I'm supposed to have killed tonight," Ken returned. "Who was he? And why did Lannigan, there, poke a knife into him?"

"Who says I poked a knife into Shelby?" Art Lannigan demanded, his eyes bulging in honest surprise as he stared at Ken.

Toby Morgan strangled on a swig of whiskey and began coughing noisily. Judd looked at Lannigan and chuckled when he saw the fat man's amazement.

"Gabe Shelby was a sort of an adopted son of old Steve Walker's," Judd told Ken. "Shelby was a loud-mouthed fellow that had got on the good side of old Steve somehow. Gabe drawed blood out of the horses he rode with filed spurs, bragged about what a lady killer he was, and you could hear the clothes he wore dang near as far as you could hear his big mouth. You done the country a service when you knifed him."

"I didn't knife Gabe Shelby, and you know it," Ken said grimly.

"The boys and me will make it look that way to Lew French if you get balky on us," Judd grunted. "Now shut up and come on. We're headin' for the badlands where the boys and me are camped. We can see the Lazy 8 headquarters from the hang-out."

"Looks like you boys have got me across a barrel," Ken told them.

HE followed Judd to the door and through into the night, Lannigan and Morgan bringing up the rear. Ken saw the lights of Dry Creek sprawled out ahead and slightly below him. He was still within the town, in fact, for this old house to which he had been taken stood on a knoll, with other houses not far distant. He heard horses stamping, and discovered that his own leg-weary bay was among them.

They mounted and rode wide of the town, pointing, Ken observed, toward a great bulwark of mountains that lay black and solid against the skyline.

"I hope it ain't far to this camp of yours, Judd," he yawned. "I'm so dog-tired I'll likely go to sleep and fall off my horse if you make me ride too far."

"Don't try any shenanigans," Judd warned, and silence fell again.

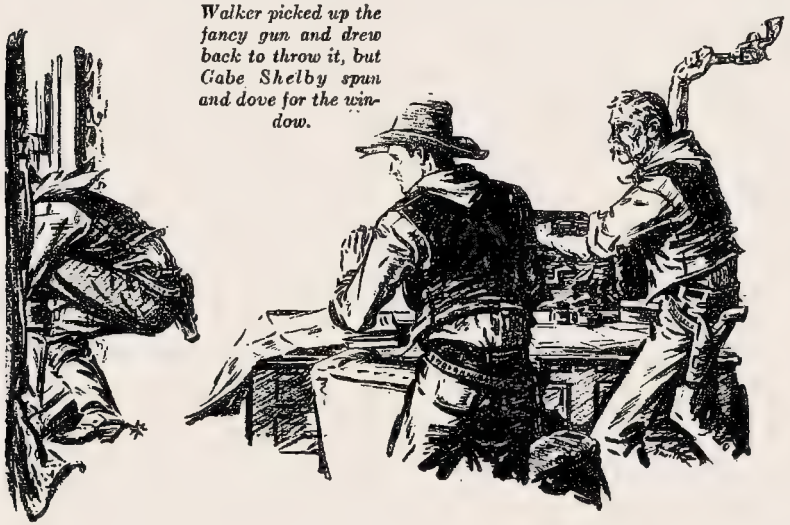
Ken did doze at intervals, yet he was never actually sound asleep. He figured they had been riding for a couple of hours, with the last

half-hour or so mostly steep climbing, when they reached the camp.

Art Lannigan built a fire and spoke of grub, but Ken paid no attention. The moment he had freed his horse, he spread his blankets under a live oak, pulled off his boots and went to sleep. But it seemed to him that he had barely closed his eyes when Judd was shaking him, telling him to get up and sample some of Lannigan's flapjacks. Ken opened his eyes, amazed to discover that it was breaking daylight. He pulled on his boots hurriedly in the chill dawn, ravenously hungry now that he could smell coffee and meat and flapjacks cooking.

Ike Judd and his two companions seemed jovial this morning, and Ken studied them closely in the full light of day. He was surprised to discover that Ike Judd was considerably older than he had judged him to be. Toby Morgan and Art Lannigan looked about like they had the night before, only Morgan's bruised face was swollen and purple-blotched now, and the big towhead had the shakes. Lannigan and Judd joshed Toby about his whiskey shivers, and wanted to know if he saw any snakes running around his plate. Morgan grinned feebly and said he sure could use a little hair of the dog. He was still trying to choke down his breakfast when Ken and the other two finished.

Ike Judd built a cigarette, and his green eyes were slitted and hard as he looked at Ken through the smoke. "All right, Brayton, it's time you got movin'," he said grimly. "Only you ain't Ken Brayton no more. You're Cal Gorman, grandson of old Steve Walker. Remember that and take the orders I'll give you now and then, and you'll get along all right. In other words, string your bets with me and you'll be in clover. Buck me, and you'll end in boothill."



Walker picked up the fancy gun and drew back to throw it, but Gabe Shelby spun and dove for the window.

CHAPTER III

BOSS OF THE LAZY 8

KEN BRAYTON had expected to find a big outfit when he reached the Lazy 8, but he had not expected anything like he saw now as he rode across a broad green meadow toward the ranch headquarters. There were so many buildings that the place looked like a small village dominated by one large house. The big ranchhouse was sheltered by a grove of giant pepper trees, some of them so spreading that their lacy boughs brushed against the dun-colored walls.

Ken knew a swift sense of uneasiness as he rode toward an arched gateway. He swung down out of the shabby old saddle that was cinched on his shaggy-coated bay, and went on foot toward the house, a little awed and more than a little nervous.

He was nearing stone steps that led up to the broad, vine-shaded porch when his legs seemed to stiffen without his willing it, halting him. From the solid vastness of the house came a voice that was roaringly angry.

"Quit lyin' to me, you no-'count young jackass!" that voice railed. "You got into this scrape because you wagged that lyin' tongue of yours once too often. Shut up! And don't expect me to give you a hand. If that grandson of mine ever shows up, I hope he's got guts enough to run you off the place."

"Phew!" Ken whistled. "Sounds like old Walker's on the peck. Maybe I'd better give him time to cool off before—"

Ken's voice ended in a startled yelp. He had turned his back, and was striding away from the stone steps when a voice challenged him from behind with all the tones and overtones of a thunderclap.

"Who in thunder are you, and what're you pussyfootin' around here for?" that voice demanded.

Ken was not sure, but he thought he turned around with neither foot touching the ground. He had jumped high enough, at least, to have made that possible.

A man stood on the deep porch—a white-maned, eagle-beaked oldster. The long ends of a flowing white mustache hung down past the corners of a mouth that was hard and narrow, and Ken saw that the old man's bony hands were hovering close to black-butted six-shooters that were thonged down to lean thighs.

"Mornin'," Ken said, trying to sound casual.

He walked toward the steps and up them, no sign of nervousness about him now. He smiled a little, and was about to say something more when the man before him suddenly rocked back as if he had been struck a physical blow.

"Jehoshaphat!" the oldster half whispered, and his dark-flecked gray eyes, which reminded Ken of newly broken granite, dilated slowly.

"You're Steve Walker, I reckon?" Ken asked.

"I'm Steve Walker," the old man said almost gently. "And you're Cal Gorman, my grandson. That right?"

The granite-colored eyes were flaming from a seamed white face, and the hard mouth was pinched into a bloodless line. Ken Brayton felt a chill tingle along his spine. Watching that old man before him was like watching a boiler that had too much steam up and was ready to blow to pieces.

"I was sent here to pass myself off as your grandson," Ken was saying. "I'm not your grandson. I'm Ken Brayton, from Montana. But I wish you'd sort o' make out that

I didn't tell you who I am. Let on for a few days that I've passed myself off as your grandson an' that you fell for it. I'm in a tight, and there'll be a noose around my neck unless I can get proof that I didn't knife a man to death last night."

"Brayton," old Steve Walker muttered. "Montana, eh? Why, that dirty, double-crossin' old son of a mangy coyote! If I get my hands on him—"

His voice had lifted to a long howling sound before he finished. Yet he got control of himself and choked back the balance of what he had been about to say.

"So you're in a split stick, are you?" he rapped out. "You poked a knife into somebody, and now you want to hide out here on my place. Just like—"

Again he broke off when his voice started that up-swing in volume.

Ken met the accusing eyes unflinchingly. "No, I didn't poke a knife into any man," he said coolly. "If we can go inside where nobody can hear us, I'll tell you the whole thing."

"Brayton!" the old man grumbled. "Montana! Of all the low-down— Well, come on! If you want to spin me some tall windy, I reckon I ain't got no better sense than to listen."

Whirling on one heel, the oldster strode back through the door which he had left ajar. Ken followed, marveling at the agility of the white-haired cattleman.

WALKER led the way into a broad hallway, then turned into a room that would, Ken thought in surprise, have made a good-sized house all by itself, had it been partitioned off here and there. The place had the massive furniture and somewhat bleak appearance of a house lived in only by men.

Ken had just come to that conclusion when his swift-striding host turned into a doorway which opened off the living room. Following, Ken found himself in a walnut-paneled room wherein were long shelves of books, a paper-littered desk and several leather-covered easy-chairs. Steve Walker went around behind the desk and dropped into a chair that squeaked softly under his weight.

"Commence!" he ordered.

Ken sat down in one of the leather chairs, hung his floppy old John B on one knee, and began talking. He told simply of his arrival in Dry Creek the evening before, and of what had happened when he went into the Topaz Saloon for a drink of something that would take the taste of alkali from his mouth. He was watching old Steve Walker as he talked, and he guessed the old man had had trouble with Ike Judd before, for Walker was looking like an overloaded boiler again. He looked excited as well as angry.

"So that's the size of it," Ken finished. "I come on here, like Judd told me to. And I wish you'd let on that I passed myself off as your grandson and that you fell for it."

"Why do you want me to act like I'd been fooled?" the Lazy 8 owner demanded.

"I want to spike Ike Judd's game," Ken answered promptly. "I also want to clear myself on this knifin' business. I—"

He shot to his feet and seized a big pitcher of water he had noticed on the corner of Walker's desk. Crossing swiftly to a window, he dumped the contents of the pitcher down into the face of a husky man who was crouched beneath the window, peering up.

"What in the name o' time—" old Steve Walker began angrily.

A loud squall of rage and surprise from outside the window explained in part, at least, Ken's strange behavior. Then Ken was putting the pitcher carefully aside, and leaning far out the window. He seized the collar of a fancy purple shirt and also got a good hold on the vermilion silk neckerchief that was tied about the sputtering man's throat.

KEN heaved mightly, and the husky snooper came up and across the window sill. Another heave and the fellow slithered into the room, landing on his burly shoulders. He rolled over, clawing at a pearl-gripped six-shooter that rode a fancy holster thonged to his right thigh.

Ken plucked the six-shooter out of the big man's fumbling fingers, whistling softly when he discovered it to be a nickel-plated gun with gold designs along the barrel, frame and cylinder. Stepping back, he leveled the weapon at its owner.

"You sure go in for fancy fixin's," he observed. "Purple shirt, red neckcloth, fawn-colored pants, yeller boots, a cream-colored Stetson you left in the mud outside, and a duded-up gun. Are you a one-man circus, or did you aim to go to one of them costume shindigs?"

The burly young eavesdropper was on his feet now, dark eyes rolling uneasily toward Steve Walker, who was grinning about the coldest grin Ken had ever seen on a human face.

"Cal, meet somethin' I drug out of the gutter and tried to be decent to." The old man looked at Ken, then back at the man who had been eavesdropping. "But brace yourself for a shock when I tell you what that thing's name is," old Walker went on. "He's Gabe Shelby, and he'll tell you he's the champeen lady killer of Arizona. And you, Gabe, take a good look at a lad who just made even more of a jackass out o' you than nature did. He's Cal Gorman, my grandson, and I'll whup the man that says it ain't so."

"Cal Gorman!" gulped Shelby.

"Gabe Shelby!" Ken exploded.

They stared at each other in amazement.

"Throw away that fancy thing he calls a gun, Cal, and whup hell out o' Gabe," old Walker said harshly. "You're my grandson, and we've settled that part of it. But you whup Gabe until he bawls like a calf under a brandin' iron, and I'll put you in full charge of this cussed Lazy 8 outfit."

RECOVERING from his shock at learning that Gabe Shelby was very much alive, Ken glanced over at Steve Walker, to find those dark-flecked gray eyes boring into him. He looked down at the fancy gun in his hand then up at Gabe Shelby. Shelby had shoved his thick, curly hair out of his eyes now, and was trying to glare.

"If you didn't have that gun in your fist I'd knock your ears down into them ragged things that must be boots on your feet," he sneered. "But you've got the bulge now, feller, so I'll have to take what you hand out. But when the sign comes right—"

Shelby's voice ended on a startled grunt. Ken Brayton had flipped open the loading gate on the ornate six-shooter and was ramming the fat cartridges out into one palm. He laid the cartridges and the gun on Steve Walker's desk, then calmly sat down in the leather chair he had used before. His green eyes met the hard eyes of the old man behind the desk steadily.

"Even if I could, I wouldn't whip a man to get a job," he said quietly.

Gabe Shelby's handsome face was suddenly wreathed in a white-toothed grin. "So this is your grandson, eh, Walker?" he snickered. "Well, old-timer, looks like he's as short on nerve as he is on size."

"What was you doin' out under that winder?" old Steve Walker hollered, his voice fairly rattling the windows.

Gabe Shelby's face turned a shade whiter. "I wasn't under the window," he gulped. "I was just passin' by it when this sorrel-topped fool throwed that water on me."

"You're a liar!" roared Walker. "Git out o' here!"

He picked up the fancy gun, drew back and hurled it all in the same motion. But Gabe Shelby seemed to know what was coming. Spinning around, he took one long jump toward the window and dived through it. The gun struck the stretched seat of his fawn-colored pants with a resounding whack.

"Nice people," Ken Brayton observed dryly. "Maybe I'd be better off if you turned me over to the sheriff and let him hang me. Only trouble is, the sheriff likely don't want to hang me anyhow, since Shelby don't seem to be very dead. I reckon I'd better go ask Ike Judd a thing or two."

"You wait!" old Steve Walker advised. "I told that loud-mouthed Shelby that you're my grandson. He'll blab that all over the country, and I'll have a slew of explainin' to do if you up and run out on me now. Set tight, youngster, and play your hand out.

"Go see Ike Judd. Act mad about him lyin' to you about Gabe Shelby bein' dead. Then tell Judd that I accepted you as my grandson, and that you aim to keep on foolin' me, only you want a full-share cut of the cattle him and his bunch claim they aim to steal off me. Play snaky, like all you had in mind was linin' your pockets with money from stolen beef. Your life and mine, too, will be in the pot Ike Judd rakes in unless we can beat him playin' the fistful of marked cards he's dealt us."

CHAPTER IV

SURPRISE ARREST

IKE JUDD and his two companions, Art Lannigan and Toby Morgan, had finished supper and were sitting around the fire, smoking, when Ken Brayton stepped into the firelight. The three of them came to their feet in quick order, hands pawing at holsters as they eyed Ken. But none of them drew a gun, for Brayton held a six-shooter in his right hand, and the look in his green eyes warned them he would use the weapon.

"Ain't you got no better sense than to Injun up on a man's camp like this?" Judd demanded.

Ken grinned. "Don't any of you try pullin' a gun," he said.

He made the grin hard and cocky, and put a swagger into his walk as he advanced.

Ike Judd was preparing to argue matters when Art Lannigan nudged him with an elbow.

Ken swaggered up to the fire opposite the watchful trio, jiggling the six-shooter he held and still grinning crookedly. "I wanted to ask you a couple of questions, Judd, and you better not let your tongue twist the answers," he stated bluntly.

"Why, you little buzzard, I'll learn you—" Judd began harshly.

In his anger, Judd took a step forward, swinging left a little to skirt the fire. But his speech and his angry striding were both brought to an abrupt stop. The six-shooter in Ken's hand roared thunderously, and

Judd's Stetson rolled on the ground in the firelight, the crown of it ventilated by the slug that had knocked it from its owner's head.

"Behave, feller, or I'll aim a little lower next time," Ken warned.

Ike Judd swallowed hard, looked down at his hat, then back at the smoking gun in Brayton's hand. Lannigan pursed thick lips and whistled softly as he, too, looked at the bullet-punctured hat.

"If that wasn't an accident, Ike, this runt kin shoot a six too straight to suit me," declared Toby Morgan.

"All right, Brayton, go easy," Judd said gruffly. "What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

"I run into a gent out at the Lazy 8 today by the name of Gabe Shelby." Ken scowled darkly. "I want to know why you three lied to me about him bein' dead."

"Well, now, that deal did sort o' backfire, at that." Lannigan grinned a little sheepishly. "The knife that was supposed to punch a hole in Gabe Shelby's yeller heart only gouged deep enough to fetch blood along his ribs. The loud-mouthed son either fainted, or else he was smart enough to play dead until the feller who was handlin' that knife went away and let him alone."

"I don't blame you for bein' kind o' sore about that deal, Brayton." Judd tried to sound friendly, but failed. "It looked funny as the devil, I know, havin' the man you was about to be framed for killin' turn up alive."

"Maybe it was funny, but I didn't crack any ribs laughin' about it," Ken retorted. "And the next question on my mind is how come you three to pick me for framin', in the first place."

"Old Steve Walker done some advertisin' in the newspapers a while back," explained Judd. "He offered a thousand dollars for information that'd lead him to Calvin Gorman, his grandson. Them notices said Cal Gorman would have red hair and green eyes, and that he'd likely be medium built and around twenty-three or twenty-four years old."

"Ike was figgerin' on passin' himself off as Cal Gorman until he run into that part about Gorman bein' medium to small in size." Lannigan chuckled. "Ike couldn't scrooch down into his boots and look smallish to save his freckled hide, so us three set to watchin' for red-headed fellers."

"We found fat ones, skinny ones, big ones and little ones," Toby Morgan grunted. "But nary one of them assorted sorrel tops we seen had green eyes. We was about ready to give 'er up and forget the whole deal when I seen you ride into town yesterday and get off your hoss in front of the Topaz."

WHAT did Steve Walker say when you showed up this mornin'?" Ike Judd burst out. "Hang it, put up that six-shooter and act sensible, Brayton. I'm still runnin' this show even if I ain't got a murder charge I can hang over your head."

"All you're runnin' is off at the mouth," Ken told him coolly. "Steady! We'll get along if you toe the mark. I can use you, and there's big money in sight. Only don't forget, Judd, that you lost your taw, and that I'm roddin' this cow-thief outfit from here on."

Ken had tried to sound like a tough braggart who was feeling well pleased with himself. He was honestly surprised to discover that he had succeeded in part, at least. Ike Judd and the other two renegades were gaping at him. Ken had fully expected his cocky attitude to bring

snarls and scowls, if not more. But Judd and his companions seemed more uneasy than angry as they blinked at Ken, and at the cocked gun he was again jiggling.

"What makes you think you're the big auger of this bunch?" Judd demanded finally.

"Old Steve Walker claimed me for his grandson, and said he'd whip the man that said it ain't so," Ken replied honestly enough.

"The devil!" Judd exclaimed. "Then we're settin' purty."

"*I'm* settin' purty," corrected Ken. "How you three come out on the deal depends. Take orders from me, and you'll get a cut of any beef we rustle off the Lazy 8. Buck me, and I'll have the sheriff wonderin' how you three make a livin' without workin' for anybody."

Judd's eyes turned savage, and he would have answered Ken if Art Lannigan had not taken a hand. Lannigan grabbed the tall redhead's arm and said something to him in a low tone. Lannigan only spoke four or five words, Ken judged. Yet those few words were decidedly effective, for Judd forced down the anger that had mottled his homely face. But Art Lannigan did not muzzle Toby Morgan.

"You're askin' for trouble," the big towhead glowered at Ken. "Gabe Shelby got it into his head that he could take over bossin' this outfit, too. But look what hap—"

"*Shut up!*" Ike Judd squalled in desperation, but the damage had already been done.

Ken stood watching the trio before him, mind working rapidly as he considered Morgan's words.

"So that's the way the wind blows, eh?" he said after a few moments. "You three were hooked up with Gabe Shelby on a deal to rob the man who took that loud-mouthed snake in. But Shelby got to wantin' the boss' job, and darned near got a

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knife in his crooked heart. Which'll remind me to watch you three."

"You fool!" Judd flung at Morgan.

Judd turned then, his green eyes ugly slits as he looked Ken Brayton up and down. "Looks like you win, cowhand," he said through his teeth.

"That's better." Ken was grinning and swaggering again. "I'll hop on back to the ranch now and start workin' out a plan. You three stick around camp for a night, for that's when I'll be showin' up. And no drinkin' in camp, either."

HE backed into the shadows, barely smothering a chuckle of genuine amusement. He had deliberately spouted those cocky orders in order to rile the three schemers. And never had he seen three men so near the exploding point.

Ken turned once he was safely in the shadows and holstered the six-shooter without bothering to reload the one spent chamber. He moved away at a swift walk, chuckling now as Ike Judd and those other two began cursing furiously.

Ken found the horse he had left hidden in a clump of scrub oak, swung up to the saddle, and rode down toward the lowlands where the Lazy 8 lay. He could see that the ranchhouse was showing many lights, but thought perhaps Steve Walker was the sort of hombre who liked a lot of light in his house. Ken grew gravely sober as he jogged along, turning over in his mind the events of the past twenty-four hours. He liked bellowing old Steve Walker, and was worrying considerably over what the old man had said about both their lives being in danger.

"The way the old man said that, hanged if it didn't sound like he knew angles to this deal that I haven't got onto yet," Ken muttered aloud.

Abruptly he stopped muttering his thoughts aloud. He stretched up in the saddle, a tingle of uneasiness running along his spine. He was on the meadows now, only a few hundred yards from the ranchhouse. The way the big place was all lighted had been nagging at his curiosity. That faint nudging of curiosity became swift uneasiness now, for Ken saw that not only was the house fully lighted, but there were yellow blobs of light bobbing and dancing all over the place. Those bouncing balls of light were, he knew, lanterns in the hands of hurrying people. They were milling around the scatteration of lesser buildings behind the main ranchhouse, along the pathways, and even in the big corrals.

"Come on, boy!" Ken said sharply, and clamped rowels to the flanks of the big dun he had roped out of the Lazy 8 remuda late that afternoon.

He ran the dun over the spongy meadow that was irrigated to raise hay, then whirled into the lane and raced along that to the arched gateway. He quit the saddle when a tight rein brought the dun to its haunches and darted toward the gateway. But he stopped under the broad arch, boot heels digging hard as his leg muscles tensed and bunched.

A man had stepped out from behind one of the massive pillars which supported the gate's high arch—a burly, solid hulk of a man who stood at a half crouch, something long and faintly shiny pushed out before him. Ken's right hand had started to gun butt, but he halted the move now, for a deep-toned voice spoke his name questioningly.

"Brayton?" the man with the leveled gun asked.

"Sure," Ken answered immediately. "Who're you, and what's the trouble here?"

"I'm Sheriff Lew French, Brayton." The deep voice seemed to growl out the words. "Get them hands up. You're under arrest."

"Arrest?" Ken echoed amazedly. "What in blazes for, sheriff?"

"Murder, the way I read the sign," came the grim reply. "You ready to tell where you hid Steve Walker's body?"

CHAPTER V

VENGEANCE VOW

IT took Ken Brayton nearly half a minute to grasp fully what was being said to him.

"You've got the wrong man, sheriff," he said levelly. "What happened? What makes you think Steve Walker has been killed?"

"I reckon there's not much doubt about the old man bein' killed," Sheriff French replied gravely. "He sent Gabe Shelby in to town for me and Avery Simpson. When we—"

"Who's Avery Simpson?" interrupted Ken.

"Walker's lawyer," the lawman grunted. "Shelby got hold of Simpson and me like old Steve asked him to, and we come right on out," he continued. "When we got here Walker wasn't around any place. But there's a pool of blood in there by his desk, and more bloodstains on the ground under the winder of his office, where you slid the body outside to carry it off and hide it."

"Stop accusin' me of murderin' the old gent!" Ken said angrily.

The sheriff stepped behind Ken, flipped his gun from the holster.

"You're in a tight, Montana man," he said grimly. "Gabe Shelby says you come here this mornin', claimin' to be Walker's grandson. Shelby heard you and the old man quarrelin', and went into the office to find out what the trouble was. He says he throwed you out of the office.

"Walker told Shelby that he'd picked up a letter that slipped out of your pocket and started to hand it back to you when he seen that it was addressed to a feller named Ken Brayton at some town in Montana. You snatched the letter out of his hand and lit in to cussin' him for snoopin'. Shelby says that's when he went to see what the fuss was, and throwed you out of the office. Old Steve sent Shelby to town after me and his lawyer, Avery Simpson, because he was afraid you'd come back and give him trouble."

"Gabe Shelby is a low-down liar!" Ken said slowly.

He felt sick inside. Shelby had him in a split stick, no two ways about that.

Ken Brayton felt choked on the rage that burned in him when he remembered that he and old Steve Walker had been alone there in the big house all day, talking endlessly. Old Steve had wanted to know all about Ken—about his folks, his boyhood. Ken had talked freely, for there was nothing along his back trail that he needed to hide. He told Steve Walker about his mother and father, and the little Walking H outfit they had owned up yonder on the Missouri River in the Montant badlands.

Steve Walker had wanted to know the names of Ken's parents, and Ken had told him that his father's name had been John Brayton, and that his mother's name was Kathleen. He remembered saying that his mother's hair had been as black as a crow's wing, and that she had

had the bluest eyes he had ever seen.

He had talked about the ferryboat his father ran across the Missouri when the weather wasn't too cold or the stream too high. He had told about the cattle they had nursed through tough Montana winters, the deer that fed along the rough slopes, and the catfish he and his dad had caught on trot lines in the summer months.

Looking back on it now, Ken realized that Steve Walker had pumped him dry, drawn from him every precious memory of his home and his parents. Ken had choked up finally when it came to telling about how his mother had died of pneumonia two and a half years back, and how lanky, bald-headed John Brayton had died of a broken heart six months after his black-haired wife with the laughing Irish eyes had been laid to rest.

KEN remembered leaving the house shortly after telling of the death of John Brayton. He had caught a horse out of the Lazy 8 corral, strapped on the spare six-shooter Steve Walker had dug up for him, and ridden to the mesa where he had had his confab with Ike Judd. And sometime after he had left the ranch, someone had gone into Steve Walker's little office and clubbed, knifed or shot the old cattleman.

With a sinking heart, Ken realized two damning situations at the same instant. One was the fact that he had no witness to the fact that he had spent the whole day with Steve Walker and that they had not had any kind of a row, as Gabe Shelby claimed. The second point that sent cold chills up Ken's spine was the fact that his gun had a recently fired cartridge in the cylinder, because he had shot a hole through Ike Judd's hat just to show Judd and those other two that he could put a bullet where he wanted it to go. What had reminded Ken of that recently fired cartridge still in his gun was Sheriff Lew French's loud sniffing.

"Hm-m-m!" the sheriff murmured.

He did not say more, yet Ken Brayton knew that the sheriff was as pleased as his humming sounded because he had sniffed that six-shooter and knew that it had been fired recently.

"Where's Gabe Shelby?" Ken wished he had thought it over before speaking, for there had been a raspy sound in his voice that told of his jumping nerves and smoking temper.

But Sheriff Lew French did not seem to have noticed the angry growl in Ken's tones. "Shelby is up at the house," he replied. "He's broke up about old Steve, so you better stay out o' his sight. He'd maybe do you a meanness if he seen you right now."

"Unless you shoot me first, I reckon I'll see whether that loud-mouthed son will do me a meanness," Ken snapped.

He shoved past the sheriff and strode down the gravel walk, too angry to realize that the move might easily enough have brought leaden death smashing at him from the sheriff's gun. He stalked to the house and up the steps, aware that the sheriff was keeping close behind him.

Ken crossed the porch and through the door, then he was swinging down the hallway and into the living room where lamps burned brightly. His green eyes pinched down against the glare and riveted on the two men who were bending over papers spread on a center table.

THE two men at the table snapped erect, startled. One of them was big Gabe Shelby, who was now decked out in rust-red trousers that were foxed with leather, a canary-yellow shirt and a bright green neckerchief. A clear beaver Stetson was shoved back on Shelby's oiled hair, and he was wearing his fancy six-shooter in a black, hand-tooled holster fringed with buckskin that had been bleached white. One hand held a water glass half filled with whiskey, and his handsome face was flushed, his bold eyes a little too bright.

Shelby wavered slightly at sight of Ken, and white splashes showed at the corners of his full-lipped mouth. But he controlled himself, flashed a white-toothed grin and swaggered around the table to stop on wide-planted feet.

"So you caught the little hellion!" he said. "That was quick work, Lew. And he's lucky it wasn't me run onto him. If I'd sighted him sneakin' around here—"

"Listen, you double-crossin' son, I want to know why you lied to the sheriff about what took place here this mornin'," Ken cut in bluntly. "You don't know it, but you're the gent who's in a split stick. You made a mistake, Shelby, a bad one and—"

He broke off watching Gabe Shelby's face pale as he stood there. Shelby lifted the glass to his lips, swallowed what it held in two mighty gulps. But Ken was not watching that. He had moved before the sheriff could stop him.

He went over to the center table

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and around it so fast that the tall, snipey-nosed man who stood there clutching two thick sheafs of papers had no time to jump clear. Ken bounced a right hook off what little chin there was beneath the snipey-nosed gent's wide, loose mouth. The man sat down hard, spilling papers from both hands.

Ken snatched up the papers, tossed them back to the table top and was boosting the tall fellow to his feet when Sheriff Lew French came to life. But Ken had already felt the bulge under the coat tail of the man he was lifting up. He kneed the man in the seat of the pants to lift him faster, and slipped a hand under the fellow's coat at the back. When Ken's hand came out it held a stubby-barreled .41-caliber six-shooter. He stepped clear of the tall man he had knocked loose from those papers and leveled the gun at the charging sheriff.

The sheriff halted, his big, hard-muscled body stiffening as if he expected the shock of a bullet. Lew French was not old in years, yet there was a look of seasoned toughness in his craggy face, and his brown eyes seemed to look through to a man's very soul, Ken thought, watching him closely.

"Easy, sheriff," Ken warned. "I ain't resistin' arrest, you might say. I'm just sort o' stavin' it off a spell. Soon as I take care of a little unfinished business I'll hand over this gun and go to your jail house with you. That'll likely be tomorrow sometime. You stay here, and see that this long-beaked thing I took this gun away from don't touch or even look at any more papers around here. Until Steve Walker's body is found, or a court rules that he's dead, nobody has any right to go through his personal stuff."

THE tenseness left the big sheriff's muscles, and his boring eyes shifted to the tall fellow who was nursing his nub of a chin and glaring at Ken.

"Looks like this Montana buckaroo called the turn on you, Simpson," the sheriff said bluntly.

"I told Shelby we had no business goin' through Walker's papers," the lawyer snapped. "But I let him talk me into it, and deserved that whack on the chin this Montana fellow handed me."

"That batch of talk plumb changes my opinion of you," Ken grinned at the attorney. "Gabe Shelby likely had you lookin' for a will that would name him sole heir to this ranch as well as whatever money old Steve Walker had. Right?"

"If you didn't have a gun in your fist I'd work you over, Brayton!" Shelby bellowed loudly. "Simpson ain't answerin' no questions, so don't ask 'em."

"I thought so!" gritted Ken. "You was lookin' for a will, like I said. After I pulled out from the ranch this afternoon, old Steve called you in and told you that you're through here. I've got a hunch he knows that you're teamed up with Ike Judd, aimin' to steal Lazy 8 cattle and horses.

"But when you got too big for your britches, Shelby, was when you tried to take over the bossin' of Ike Judd and them two tough hands of his. You don't know it, but that was Art Lannigan cut you with a knife last night after he shot the lights out in the Topaz Saloon. Lannigan aimed to push that blade into your heart, because neither he nor Toby Morgan will ever take orders from anybody except Judd."

"What's that about a knifin'?"

the sheriff asked quickly.

"The hombre's talkin' through his hat, Lew," Gabe Shelby sneered. "I don't know nobody named Ike Judd or Art Lannigan or Toby Morgan. Nobody tried to knife me last night. Take that gun away from the sorrel top. He murdered old Steve, I tell you."

"You jumped Steve Walker, knifed, clubbed or maybe shot him when he told you you were through here," Ken said grimly. "You didn't stop to think that it was still daylight, and that somebody might see you when you slipped the old man's body out the window, then stepped out and picked it up, did you? Well, I ain't sayin' nothin' definite, remember. But what if Ike Judd and them two gun-slingin' pards of his happened to be nosin' around close about the time you slid Walker's bleedin' body out that window then come out yourself and picked it up?

"Nope, I ain't sayin' nothin' positive, Shelby. But I'm siftin' off yonder to a certain mesa to have a little talk with Ike Judd. The way him and his boys are down on you because you tried to take over and boss the bunch—"

"Hold it!" Sheriff French yelled when Gabe Shelby suddenly plunged toward the door.

The lawman was grabbing the rifle he had leaned against a chair when Ken Brayton smashed into his legs in a flying tackle. They went down in a tangle of arms and threshing legs, Ken coolly plucking his own six-shooter from the sheriff's waistband, then snatching the officer's rifle as he sprang to his feet.

"Hold on!" French bawled. "Why in thunder did you want Gabe Shelby to get away? You explain—"

"Sorry, sheriff, but I've got some unfinished business," Ken cut in.

He darted out into the hallway and ran along it, holstering his six-shooter. He dropped the sheriff's rifle and the .41 he had taken away from Avery Simpson near the front door. Then he was out in the night, sprinting to the horse he had left at the gate. At one of the corrals far to the rear of the place he could see lanterns bobbing, and heard Gabe Shelby telling some cowhand to rope the fastest horse among the penned stock.

Ken mounted, and walked his horse to the soft turf of the irrigated meadow. He headed for the mesa where Ike Judd was camped. He had set a gun trap for dangerous men, and wanted to be there when that trap was sprung.

Gabe Shelby would ride to Ike Judd's camp, too, just as soon as he could get a horse under him. But Ken wanted to be there first, and be close enough to hear what was said. Gabe Shelby had knifed, clubbed or shot old Steve Walker, and Ken intended to get the deadwood on Gabe Shelby if it was the last thing he ever did. He made that silent vow as he pulled the gun out of his holster and replaced the one spent cartridge in the cylinder.

CHAPTER VI

SHOWDOWN

IT was breaking daylight before Ike Judd and his two renegades arrived at their camp on the mesa. Ken Brayton did not hear their horses until they were almost in the camp.

He had lain in a thicket most of the night, not daring to move around because Gabe Shelby was at that camp, too, stomping up and down the clearing and drinking from a bottle. Shelby did not seem drunk,

however, despite the fact that the quart he had found in Toby Morgan's blankets was nearly empty. The big, handsome cowhand stood there now, the bottle in his left hand and his fancy six-shooter in his right. Shelby's eyes had a red, murderous look in the dawn light, and the grin kinking his lips contained no mirth.

Judd and his two side-kicks had not seen Gabe Shelby until they were inside the clearing. Ken Brayton watched them jerk erect in their saddles, begin fighting the torpor of a night's carousal. Judd said something over the top of his shoulder, and Art Lannigan neck-reined his horse, putting space between himself and his leader. Toby Morgan pulled his horse to the left of Judd, and the three advanced, watching Shelby. They halted ten yards from Shelby, the effects of their night-long drinking shaken off completely.

"I'll belly-shoot the first one of you double-crossin' sons that reaches for a gun!" Gabe Shelby's voice was hoarse.

"Callin' us double-crossers is a sort o' unhealthy habit to get into, Gabe," Judd parried coolly. "You must be plumb snake-seein' drunk. Me and these two boys are your friends."

"Sure, you three are my friends!" Shelby snorted. "You, Judd, framed that fight in the Topaz last night between Toby and that other cowhand. You shot out the lights, Lannigan, for I seen you doin' it. Then, you fat son, you scrooched down the bar to where I was standin' and tried to bury a knife in my ribs.

"You reached out with the point of the knife and sort o' felt for me then shoved quick and hard. But I knowed that it was a knife touched my shirt, and tried to whirl around. I tripped over some fool and was fallin' when your frog sticker nicked my back. My head hit the foot rail, and I reckon I was out for a minute or two. But you thought you'd finished me, and you lifted my wallet."

Ken frantically massaged his right hand and wrist until the stiffness was gone, then slipped his six-shooter from holster. He saw Ike Judd and Art Lannigan exchange sidelong glances, and knew that something was due to happen mighty sudden.

"Sure, you boys are my friends!" Gabe Shelby's slurring voice ran on. "You picked up a half-pint redhead who fills the description old Steve Walker had printed in the papers of his grandson. I recollect seein' you and that Montana buckaroo standin' at the bar just about the time Toby Morgan started his fight last night, Judd. Today that Brayton jigger showed up at the ranch, and hanged if old Walker didn't claim Brayton for his grandson.

"I ain't got any proof of it, but I know you sent Brayton to the Lazy 8. And you was snoopin' around the ranch late today, too. You seen me slide Walker's carcass out that window and lug him to the well and throw him in."

Ike Judd and his two companions were stiffer than ever now, eyes widening a little as they listened to Gabe Shelby.

KEN BRAYTON'S face was pale from something besides the hours of cramp and chill he had suffered. He eased up to his knees, then got to his feet. But he had to wait another few seconds, for his legs felt numb and dead.

"You three figgered to get me out on a limb, then saw it off behind me." Gabe Shelby laughed harshly at Ike Judd and the other two. "But I beat you to the sawin', you blasted

penny-ante border-jumpers! Old Steve Walker made out a will a year back, namin' me sole heir to all his money, land and cattle in case his grandson couldn't be found.

"When that Montana range bum showed up and fooled Walker today, the old buzzard called me into that office of his and told me that he'd have to rewrite that will. He aimed to push me out with only a ten-thousand-dollar stake, which he claimed would be enough to set me up with my own spread."

"You beefed the old man before he could tear up that will, eh?" Art Lannigan mused.

"Think I'd let that little Montana whelp cheat me out o' the ranch?" Shelby retorted.

"You should have glaumed onto that ten thousand and let it go at that, Shelby," Morgan declared.

"Why?" demanded Shelby.

"Because you'd be in the clear now, with ten thousand dollars, instead of in a split stick with a hang noose waitin' for you!" Ken Brayton's voice lashed out.

Ken stepped into the clearing, the six-shooter in his hand crashing thunderously when Gabe Shelby whirled on him, started chopping his fancy gun down for a snap shot. At the roar of Ken's gun, Shelby staggered, a hoarse bawl of pain coming from his open mouth. His gun was on the ground now, and his right arm dangled at his side, broken halfway between elbow and shoulder by Ken's bullet.

Ken turned his green eyes and smoking gun on Ike Judd and Judd's two companions just as they were grabbing for guns. Ken said nothing at all, yet Judd let go of the guns he had half drawn, and shook his head at Art Lannigan and Toby Morgan. They, too, released weapons that were not yet drawn.

"You three," Ken told them bluntly, "had better raise a dust

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gettin' out of this country."

"You cocky little hellion!" muttered Judd.

"Instead of arguin', you'd better take my advice and sift," Ken told him. "When I get Gabe Shelby back to the Lazy 8 and hand him over to the sheriff for hangin', I aim to tell the sheriff about you three."

"Gimme a hand, Judd!" Shelby choked. "You and your boys shoot that Montana snake and I'll cut you in, equal shares with me, on the Lazy 8. The way that will stands, I own that spread. Shut this coyote's mouth before he has a chance to spoil things, and the four of us will own the Lazy 8."

Music to renegade ears, those promises of wealth!

"Man, what I can do with a quarter interest in a spread like the Lazy 8!" Toby grinned, and slid his big hand toward a six-shooter that was on his off flank from Ken.

Art Lannigan's fat lips were pursed, his eyes shining greedily as he, too, considered the possibility of owning a fourth interest in the Lazy 8.

"*Nada!*" Ike Judd said harshly. "Which means nothin' doin', Shelby. You're a loud-mouthed fool, and my boys and me ain't havin' no deal with you. Old Steve Walker taken you in when you was a moochin' drifter and give you every chance to be a man. You double-crossed old Walker, and wound up by killin' him. Art and Toby and me ain't trustin' your kind of a sidewinder. We're takin' this Montana buckaroo's advice and headin' for a place where the climate fits our clothes."

Ken Brayton let out a breath that he had held for long seconds, relief pouring through him as he watched Judd turn his horse and wave Art Lannigan and Toby Morgan on ahead of him. They rode away at an easy jog, not looking back.

WHEN the three were out of sight in the timber Ken turned to Gabe Shelby. The man was shaking violently, and kept rolling his eyes toward a clump of timber where Ken had heard a horse stamping throughout the night.

"Don't try it, mister!" Ken warned. "Sit down on that rock, there, while I bind up that arm."

Blood dripped off the fingers of Shelby's right hand, and Ken reckoned that the big dude was half out of his mind with the pain of that shattered arm.

Shelby walked over to the rock Ken had indicated and sat down, his breath coming in hoarse gasps. Ken holstered his six-shooter and advanced, keen-bladed stock knife in his hand now. He split the shirt sleeve of the wounded arm from elbow to wrist, gave the soaked undershirt sleeve the same treatment, and used a strip of the tougher undershirt material to fashion a tourniquet.

He had applied the tourniquet and tied it in place, and was fixing a crude bandage over the bullet hole in Shelby's muscular arm when some faint sound warned him that danger was at his back. A gun roared, and Ken felt as if his whole back had been caved in. He fell on his face, choking when loose dirt got into his mouth and nostrils.

There were yells and stamping feet and more shooting, yet Ken could see nothing through the red haze that had settled around him. He did not feel pain as yet, just a cold numbness that made his movements seem intolerably slow as he forced himself over on his left side and groped for the gun that was in his holster. He got the gun clear at last, and the red haze began breaking away.

He saw them then—Ike Judd, Art Lannigan and Toby Morgan—running toward the camp, hollering Gabe Shelby's name. He saw Shelby, too, crawling around on the ground and laughing insanely as he fired that fancy six-shooter. Then Judd was down on the ground, too, blood running from a hole in his neck.

"Toby! Art!" Judd yelled. "Get that Montana buckaroo. He's movin' around, so your slug didn't finish him, Art. You two get him while I try to make this Shelby buzzard savvy that we're here to back his play and claim that share in the Lazy 8 he offered—"

Judd stopped talking then, for a bullet from Gabe Shelby's gun struck him in the chest, knocking him down. But the rustler did not remain down. He came back to knees and one hand, and hobbled forward that way, something terrible in his green eyes now as he advanced on Gabe Shelby like some stricken animal spending its last waning strength in battle. Gabe Shelby's insane laughter became hysterical sobbing as slugs from Judd's gun hammered into his body. Yet Shelby was shooting, too, and still crawling toward Ike Judd.

THE horror of it fascinated Ken Brayton, holding his attention for ticking seconds, until Ike Judd and Gabe Shelby were so close that their spurting guns seemed ready to fend and clash like flaming swords. Then a bullet cut Ken's cheek, and another popped against the rock scant inches from his hatless head. He rolled over sidewise, a moan wrenching from his pale lips when pain ripped through his back.

The red haze returned, hampering his vision somewhat. But he

could see Art Lannigan bouncing toward him like a fat rubber ball, and big Toby Morgan striding along to the left and a little behind Lannigan.

Ken flipped his six-shooter up and across his chest, thumbed the hammer back and let it fall twice before Art Lannigan's pudgy figure quit bouncing toward him behind spitting guns. Lannigan threw his guns down, slapped stubby hands to his belly, and doubled over convulsively.

Ken heard shouting and the sound of running horses, but was too busy getting his gun slanted over to cover Toby Morgan to bother finding out who the riders were. He shot at Toby and saw the big towhead break stride and almost fall.

Then there were horses and men all around, and someone came to Ken and talked to him about the fight being over, and said that he did not need to hang onto the gun any longer. The red haze was so bad again that Ken could not see, yet he recognized the voice as that of Sheriff Lew French.

He relaxed his grip on the six-shooter, and tried to tell the sheriff that Gabe Shelby had killed Steve Walker, and that the old man's body was in the well. Then Ken cussed the sheriff for wasting time examining those throbbing wounds, and advised him to take the guns away from Toby Morgan before they both got shot in the back.

When the pains in Ken's back eased and the red haze lifted again, he looked around, aiming to see if the sheriff had taken the guns from Toby Morgan. But he forgot about Morgan and the nightmare of guns and blood and dying men he had gone through. The camp was swarming with gun-hung cowhands who had spread blankets over Ike Judd, Gabe Shelby and Art Lannigan. Toby Morgan was propped against a rock, bare to the waist, his powerful right shoulder swathed in bandages. He was trying to act as if he did not see the lanky Lazy 8 cowhand who was sitting cross-legged a few feet from him with a cocked six-shooter handy in his lap.

Those things Ken saw hazily. His amazed eyes were following a gaunt man in wrinkled, wet clothes—an eagle-beaked hard-eyed oldster with drooping white mustache and a shock of white hair sticking up out of bloodstained bandages that circled his head. Ken was afraid to believe his own eyes until he heard that old man hollering at the top of his lungs about how long it took a couple of cowhands to get to Dry Creek and return with Doc Beese.

"Steve Walker!" Ken gulped, and tried to sit up.

"Boss!" a cowboy shouted. "That Montana feller has come out of it."

THE white-maned old cowman came legging swiftly to Ken. "Lay down there, button, and do 'er quick!" he hollered. "Looks like a bullet scraped your backbone, and I don't want you wrasslin' around until Doc Beese gets here."

Ken Brayton did not need any urging. He lay back to the thick pad of blankets that had belonged to the three dead rustlers. His movements had brought considerable pain to his wounded back, yet it was more a shaky reaction at seeing old Steve Walker alive that put him down.

"I thought you were done for, Mr. Walker," he said slowly. "Gabe Shelby claimed—"

"Never mind," the old man said

gruffly, squatting beside Ken. "Gabe Shelby did bat me on the head and throw me in the well, sure. I was afraid to holler, because I knowed Shelby would come and chuck a boulder down on my head if he found out he hadn't busted my thick skull when he gun-whipped me there in the office.

"One of them cowpunchers of mine, Shorty Merchant, finally had sense enough to look in the well—and fell in on top of me, in his excitement. Shorty yelled plenty, and the others come and got us out.

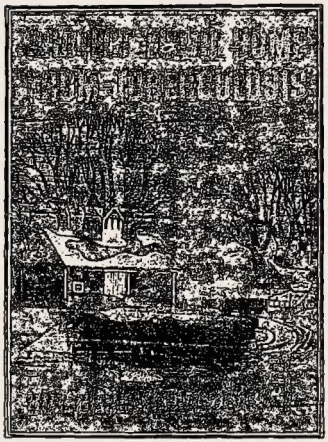
"Lew French told me what happened at the ranch tonight and I got up here fast as I could, for I knowed Ike Judd was camped on this mesa. We arrived in time to mop up after you'd done the fightin', was about all. Toby Morgan told us about it, so you don't need to try explainin' things.

"I sent a couple of the boys to town for the medico, and they ought to be showin' up any time now. You rest, Cal. I've spent too many years huntin' my little girl's son to let anything happen to you now."

Ken Brayton felt a lump come into his throat. He glanced at the Lazy 8 cowhands, who had tactfully remained at a distance.

"When I come to your ranch yesterday mornin', Mr. Walker, I told you the straight of things," Ken said slowly. "I'm not Cal Gorman, your grandson. I'm Ken Brayton, from the Montana badlands. I told you about my folks who died there, and that I drifted down this way because they had lived here some time or other before I was born, and mentioned this border, and even Dry Creek town off and on ever since I can remember."

"Yeah, you told me all that, son," old Steve Walker smiled. "And some day I'll get around to tellin' you about a feller who used to live



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down here along the border—a feller named Pelon, and how this Pelon taken my grandson to raise as his own son."

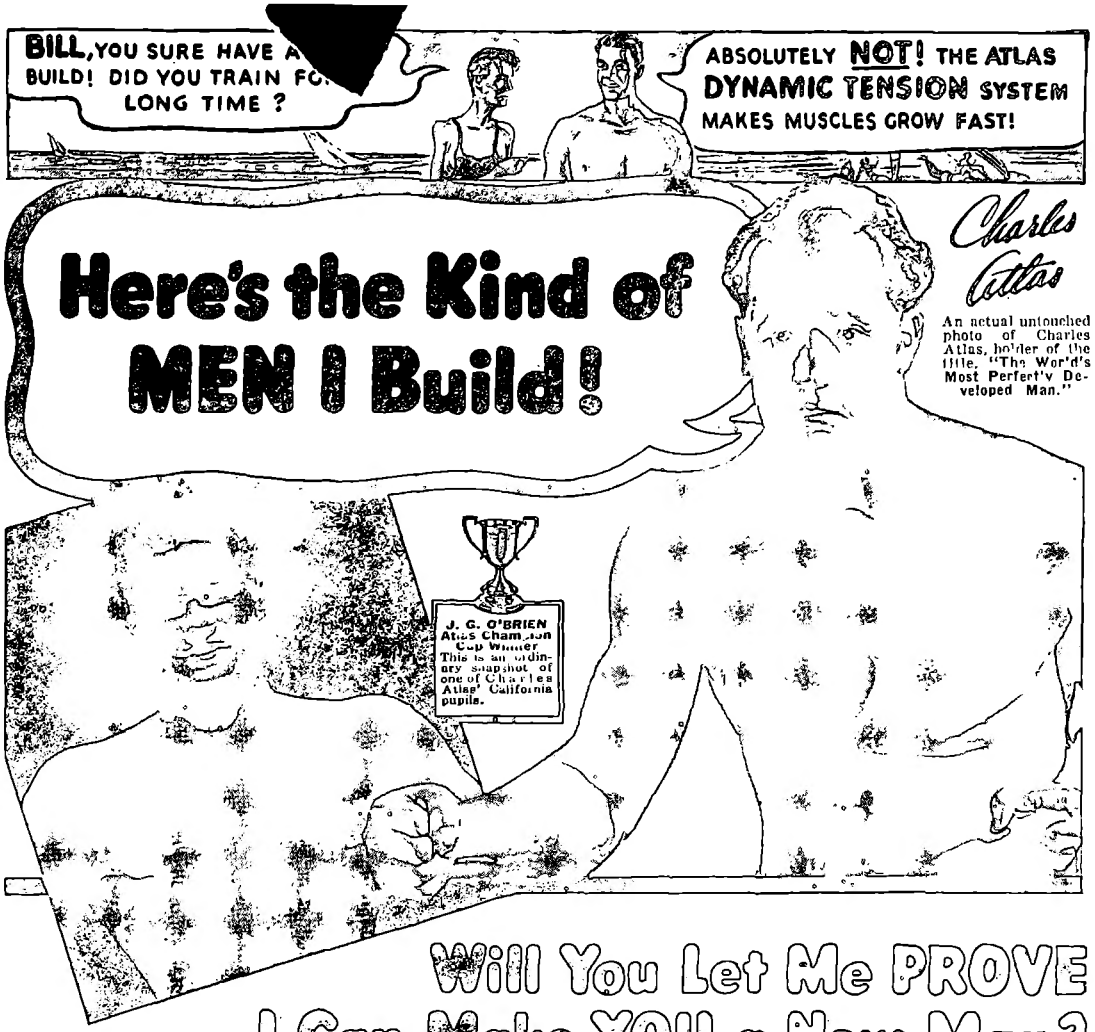
"I've heard him mentioned," Ken admitted. "Ike Judd told me about Pelon, and how Pelon disappeared with your grandson."

"But maybe Ike Judd didn't tell you that Pelon had another name, because I'm the only man livin' now who knowed Pelon's real brand," Steve Walker chuckled. "I hear the boys comin' back with the doc now, so we'll have to cut our gab short. But remind me to tell you about that Pelon feller some day, son. And make me think to mention that Pelon's real name was John Brayton, and that him and that Kathleen wife of his are gonna be moved down here to the country they loved, where the boy they raised as their own son can see their graves any time he wants.

"I'll try to make up to you all the things I wish I hadn't done to you and to your mother, who was my daughter," old Steve said huskily. "I reckon the Big Boss up yonder has sort o' forgiven me or you'd never have come home. Do you reckon you could forgive me, too, Cal?"

The Montana buckaroo could not have spoken had he tried, for that lump had crawled higher in his throat now. And yet he was happier than he had been at any time since he had seen the black-haired Irish woman he had called mother, and the bald, fiddle-playing, jig-dancing man he had called dad, laid to rest in Montana. But Ken answered old Steve Walker's plea for friendship and understanding even if he could not trust himself to speak. He stretched out his right hand and his grandfather seized that hand and gripped it hard.

THE END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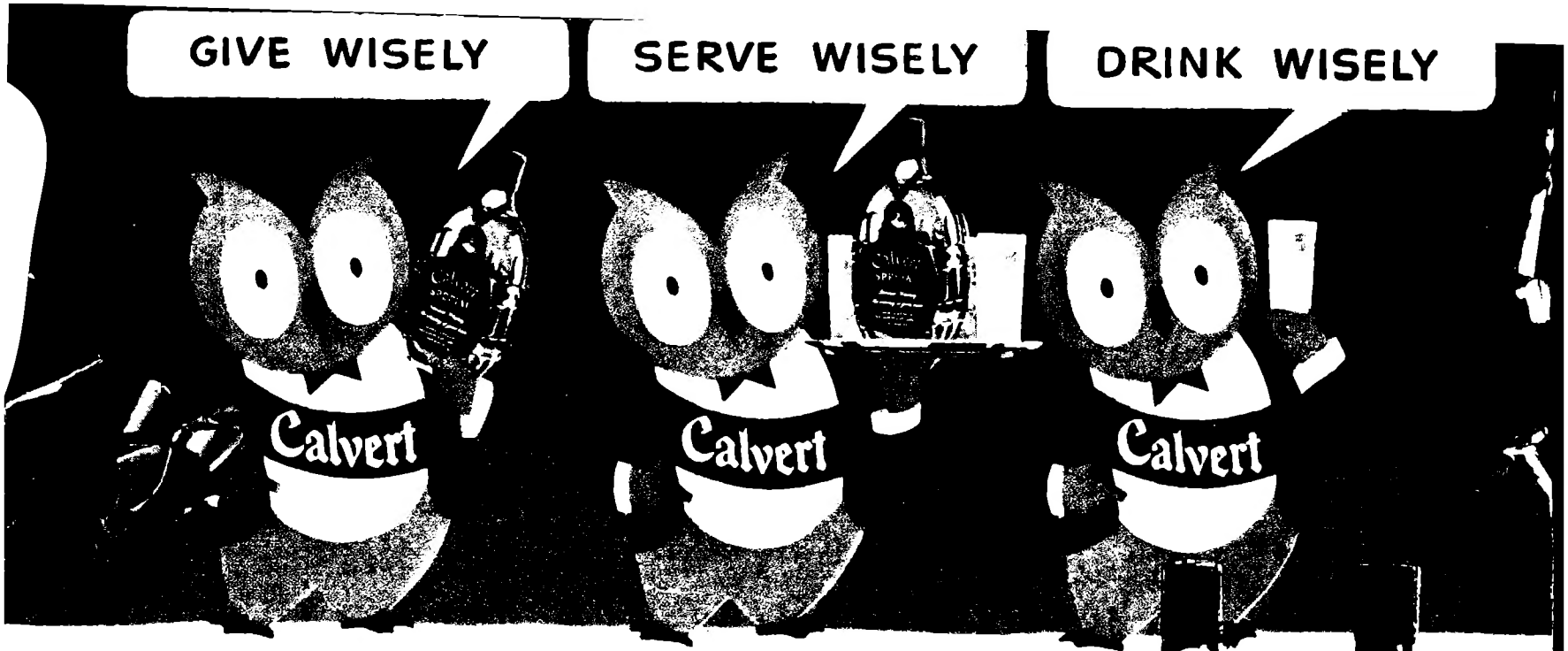

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